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7

BLACK SUMMONER

THE CREEPING DARKNESS



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"HA. HA HA!
NOT MANY PEOPLE
CAN GET ME THIS
FIRED UP! YOU
REALLY ARE
GOOD!"

BAHL

SERA

"YOU'RE FREE
TO GO CRAZY
ALL YOU WANT
BUT CAN YOU
NOT DRAG ME
INTO IT?"



LEONHART'S
UNIQUE SKILL,
METAMORPHOSIS,
ALLOWED HIM TO
CHANGE NOT ONLY
HIS APPEARANCE
AND THE DETAILS
OF HIS VISIBLE
STATUS BUT ALSO
THE OUTFIT HE
WAS WEARING.

"AHA HA!
I LOVE
YOU SO
MUCH,
KEL-NII!"

KELVIN

LEONHART GAUN



BLACK SUMMONER

Characters

Outline as of the Previous Volume

Transmigrator from Japan, battle junkie, and Summoner.

In recognition of his numerous achievements, Kelvin was invited to participate at the next Naming Ceremony being hosted in Gaun, the Country of Beastkin. When he arrived, he discovered that there was another massive event happening right before the ceremony—a martial arts tournament called the Beast King Festival. After successfully securing several participation slots for his party and winning round after round, he and his companions eventually found themselves facing opponents such as Goldiana's junior disciple and a mysterious girl who seemed strangely similar to Sera. What stormy developments could these twists forbode?

Kelvin

A Summoner who obtained powerful skills in exchange for memories of his past life. Constantly seeking battles with mighty foes. Alias: "Grim Reaper."

Kelvin's Companions



Efil

A half-elf girl purchased by Kelvin as a slave. The perfect maid. Loves her master deeply.



Sera

A beautiful demon in Kelvin's service. Daughter of the previous Demon Lord. Ignorant and knowledgeable in equal measure.



Melfina

Goddess of Reincarnation (currently on leave). Refers to herself as Kelvin's wife. Eats a lot.



Rion

A hero summoned by Kelvin who became his half-sister. Has a rather skewed view of what it means to be a little sister.



Clotho

The first monster Kelvin ever took on as a Follower. Its Storage and ability to create materials make it a key player!



Gerard

The dark knight who serves Kelvin. Dotes on Ruka and Rion as if they're his own grandchildren.



Alex

Kelvin's shadow wolf Follower. Rion's partner. Gets a thorough brushing every day.



Ellie

A maid in Kelvin's house who applied for the job in order to repay him for rescuing her and her daughter, Ruka.



Ruka

An apprentice maid in Kelvin's house. Full of energy. Loved by the whole neighborhood. Every day's a blast!

Parth, the City of Peace

A city located right in between the four great powers of the Eastern Continent. Founded as a symbol of hope for longlasting peace.

Rio

Guildmaster of the Parth Adventurer's Guild.
Quite the schemer. Alias: "Analyzer."



Ange

A popular receptionist at the guild. Has feelings for Kelvin. Would like more screentime.

Toraj, the Country of Water

Faces the Sea of Dragons. Has very advanced shipbuilding and agricultural industries. Rooted in Japanese culture with staples like rice and tatami.



Tsubaki Fujiwara

Queen of Toraj. Has taken a liking to Kelvin and his companions. Constantly tries to solicit their services.

The Holy Empire of Deramis

A country that worships the Goddess of Reincarnation. Headed by the Pope. Connected to the Rizean Empire on the Western Continent through Crux Bridge, but is at odds with them.



Colette

Oracle of Deramis. Summoned the Heroes. Her fanaticism makes her a bit sick in the head.



Kanzaki Touya

A Hero summoned from Japan. Lucky pervert. Dual wields. Heading for the Western Continent.



Shiga Setsuna

A Hero summoned from Japan. Serious and diligent. Cleans up the problems that Touya causes.



Mizuoka Nana

A Hero summoned from Japan. Partnered with Mun-chan, a flame dragon. Has a comforting aura.



Kuromiya Miyabi

A Hero summoned from Japan. One quarter Russian. Her thoughts are a complete mystery.

Gaun, the Country of Beastkin

The home of the beastkin, who possess superior physical prowess. Its people believe that strength is everything. Crowns the strongest person in the country as king.

Leonhart Gaun

The Beast King of Gaun. Served as proctor for Kelvin's Rank 5 promotion exam.

Kilto Gaun

The Beast King's third son. A doting brother who thinks Goma, his little sister, is the cutest thing in the world.

Sabato

The Beast King's fourth son. Can't beat Goma in physical or verbal fights.

Goma

The Beast King's only daughter. Princess of Gaun. Always beats Sabato up.

The Military Kingdom of Trycen

A militaristic country that touts human supremacy. Rumored to be kidnapping the citizens of other countries as slaves and up to similarly suspicious endeavors.

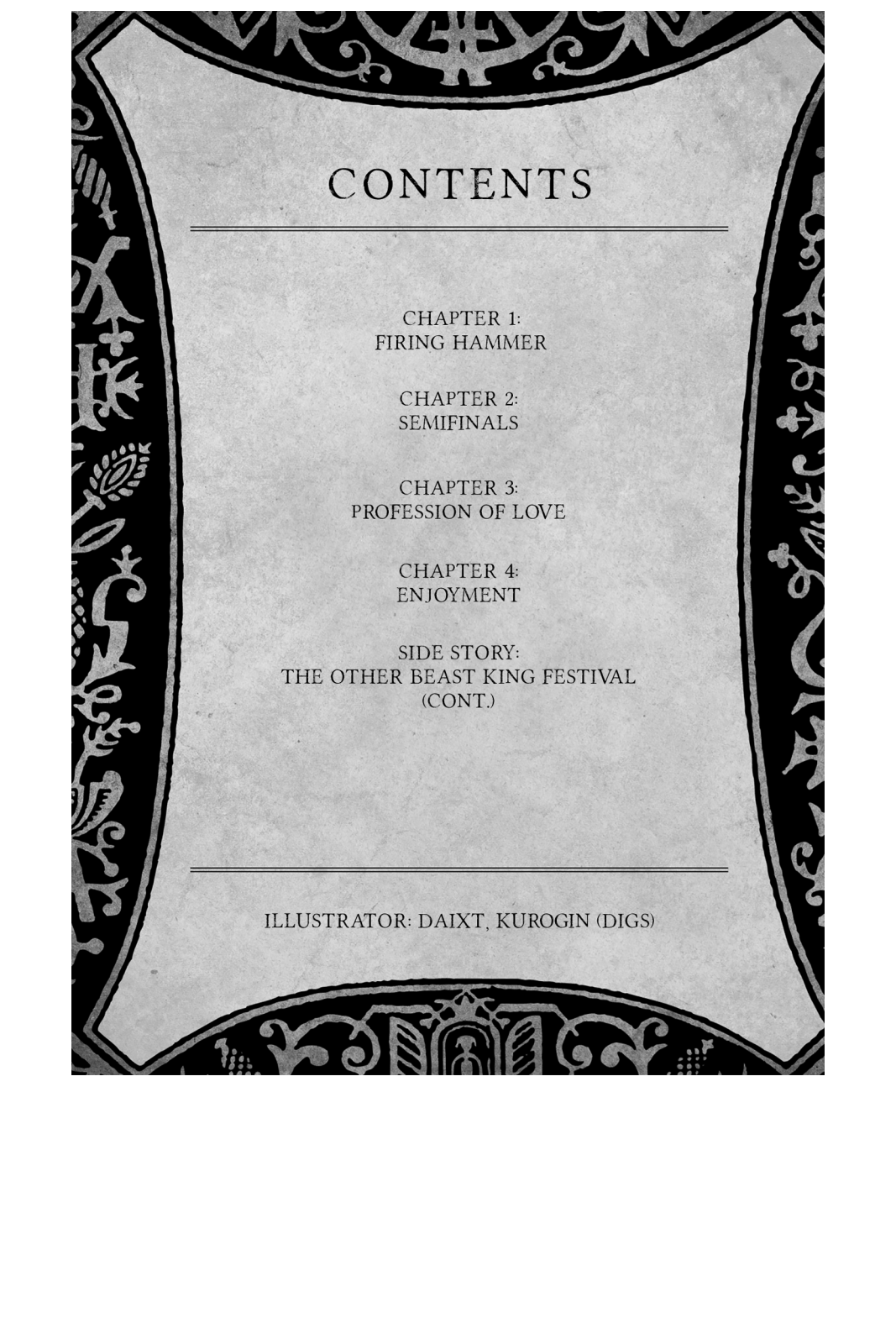


Shutola Trycen

Princess of Trycen. Mind has regressed in age due to the brainwashing from Demon Lord Zel, her late father.

Azgrad Trycen

Crown Prince of Trycen and general of the Dragon Knight Order. Incredibly proficient dragon rider.



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ILLUSTRATOR: DAIXT, KUROGIN (DIGS)

Chapter 1: Firing Hammer

My party and I watched from our VIP viewing box as Rion cheerily headed down to the stage in response to Ronove's call. In my case, I had no choice, as I was still completely locked in place thanks to the efforts of Efil and Melfina on either side and Sera behind my back.

I've already fully recovered. Even better, I'm in tip-top shape.

"Will Rion-chan be okay?" Shutola asked worriedly.

"Her opponent is the Beast King," Melfina replied. "At the very least, things will not be easy."

"I think so too, but what I'm curious about is what form he will take for this fight. He's chosen people related to his opponent in all his matches so far," I added, heaving an internal sigh of relief upon realizing that Melfina was going to spare me the White Magic spamming during the match.

That spell is so bright, I wouldn't have been able to see jack.

Every person who had faced the Beast King in the tournament so far had seemed shaken the moment they had laid eyes on his chosen appearance. There was no way for me to know exactly how his opponents were related to those he looked like, but I could guess. Considering his personality, they were likely all people his opponents had trouble lifting a hand against.

Leonhart Gaun's shape-shifting ability came from a magic item considered a Gaunian national treasure. We had seen it in action once when we were at the Village of Elves. The fact that its usage was allowed in the tournament meant it could reasonably be called an accessory.

"Who would he transform into for Rion?" Sera thought about it for a moment. "It'd have to be Kelvin, right?"

"What? Why me?"

"What are you all saying? Of course it would be me, her grandfather!"

"Rion-sama has no issue fighting Master or Gerard-san, though. They do just fine in practice."

"When fighting normally, yes," I agreed. "But this is Leonhart we're talking about. He's definitely going to try to get into Rion's head."

Goma told me plenty of stories over dinner the other night. It never

hurts to be wary. But if Leonhart traumatizes Rion... Heh heh heh...

“M’lady’s appeared!”

Everyone turned at Dahak’s cry just in time to see Rion walk onto the stage to thundering cheers and applause. Through her prior matches, she had gained quite a lot of fans—and it was a varied group too, ranging from old couples supporting her like Gerard did to wildly enthusiastic zealots and everything in between. In this tournament, where fighting was restricted to physical combat, female participants—a certain king disguising himself as a woman aside—were few and far between. As a result, when a beautiful woman like Sera or a cute girl like Rion got on stage, the support was overwhelming. The same had been true for Bahl’s matches.

I nodded. “Looks like she’s in good shape.”

“Rion-chan’s so amazing,” Shutola murmured with respect in her eyes. “Does she really not get nervous even when so many people are looking at her?”

In her case, she’s got Nerves of Steel. But don’t worry, Shutola; when you grow up, you’ll be just as amazing. I still can’t believe how you became so upright and proper amid several brothers like Tabura.

“The Beast King has also appeared,” Melfina announced.

“So he has,” I replied, glancing over. “So, whose appear— Oh dear...”

“What’s wrong, dearest broth— Oh no.”

Rion really might be in trouble.



Rion and Leonhart, the participants of the next match, stepped up to face off against each other and prepare for the match. However, Rion was clearly unsettled. The atmosphere in the venue turned into one of lament.

“Um, you’re Leonhart-sama...right?”

“Yep! I may look like this, but I’m the Beast King, Rion-chan!”

The form the Beast King had adopted was that of a little girl shorter than Rion, with waist-length silky-smooth blonde hair and dazzling green eyes. Indeed, it was none other than Shutola’s current childlike appearance. The simple white dress he was wearing seemed entirely inappropriate for battle, and he held no weapon in his hands. It was such a defenseless look that it was as if he were a young lady from some noble house who had slipped away from her entourage and somehow climbed onto the stage.

“Leonhart-sama...seems to be entirely empty-handed. Um, can we actually begin the match like this?” Ronove asked on behalf of all the audience members thinking the same thing.

“This appearance isn’t against the rules, right?” Leonhart replied

offhandedly, clearly indicating that not bringing a weapon had been a conscious choice and not a gaffe. “I don’t mind.”

“Um, are you sure?” Rion asked.

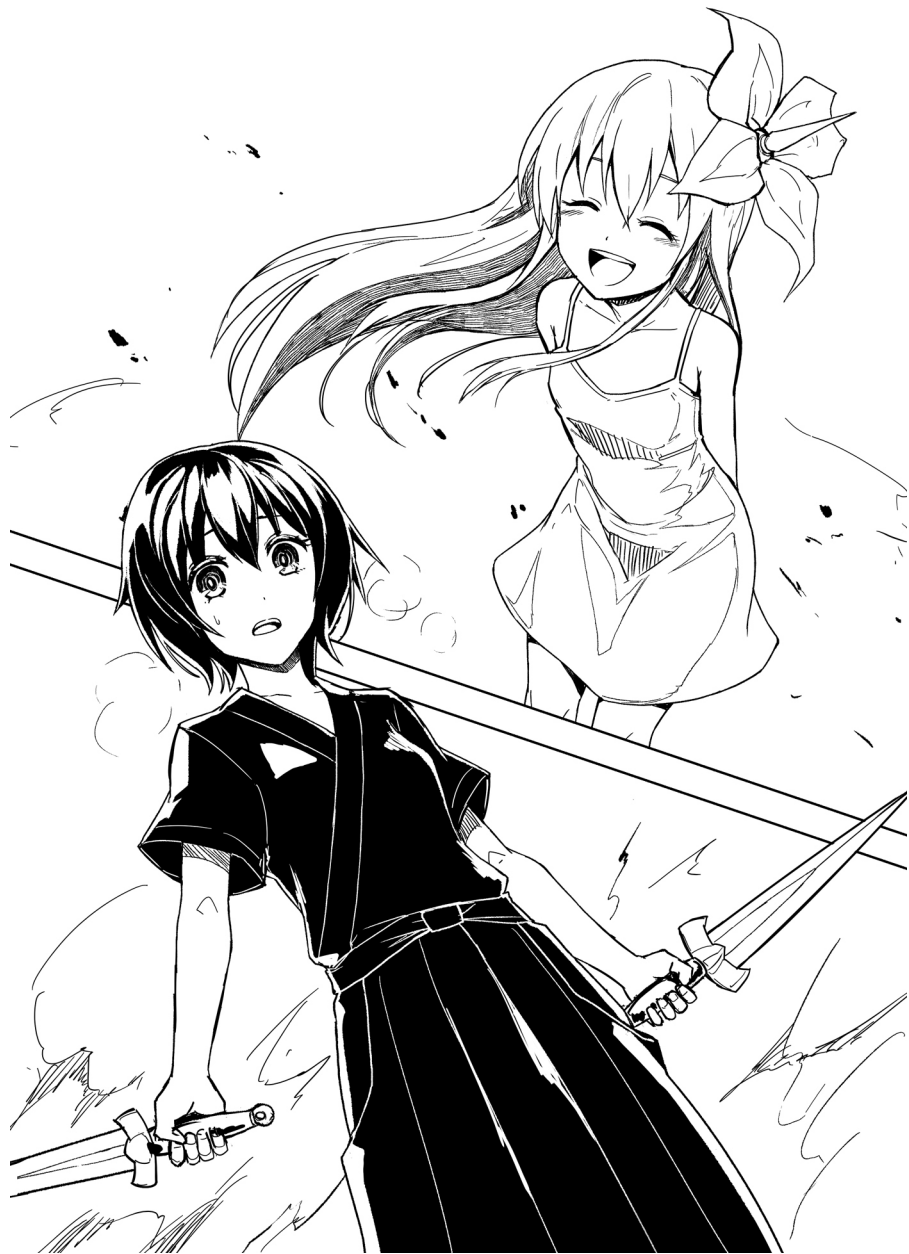
“Of course!” Leonhart answered, turning towards his opponent. “I don’t want to hurt you, Rion-chan!”

“What?”

“It...appears both sides are ready, so I’ll be starting this match! Final match of Block B, ready... FIGHT!”

Despite being interrupted mid-conversation, Rion shifted into a battle stance as soon as Ronove gave her signal. She was indeed shaken but raised her guard properly in spite of it.

Shutola—no, the Beast King—on the other hand simply walked forward with the same innocent smile Shutola always had when approaching Rion to invite her to play.



“What are you—”

“Rion-chan, I don’t want to fight you. But as the Beast King, I can’t just forfeit without making an appearance. So please, cut me down.”

“Wh-What are you saying?!”

“I mean it, Rion-chan.”

Although his steps were small, Leonhart had walked right up to Rion before she knew it. He stopped at the precise distance where he was entirely disadvantaged: within the reach of Rion’s weapon but beyond that of his bare fists. The smile remained on his face as he waited for her to make her move.

“What’s wrong, Rion-chan? My neck is right here. Please, just one quick chop.”

“Ugh...”

Rion hesitated, unable to determine if this was a trap or if Leonhart really had no intention of fighting. Her mind locked up as doubt and questions swirled like a whirlpool within. Most of all, her kindness made her unable to choose to harm her friend, especially when she was entirely defenseless.

“I see. You really are kind, Rion-chan. But in that case...”

“Huh? Wait, what are you doing?!”

The Beast King slowly reached out and grabbed one of the swords in Rion’s grip. Blood dripped onto the stage as the palm of his hand was cut on the razor-sharp edge.

“If you can’t do it, I’ll have to do it for you, Rion-chan.”

“No, don’t! Let go!”

Leonhart was forcibly bringing the blade towards his own throat. Even though he looked like Shutola, he still had all his strength as the Beast King. Rion desperately tried to resist, but her sword inched closer and closer in defiance of her will. The blood slowly drained from her face with each moment.

“Please, stop! I don’t want to win like this!”

“But I don’t have a choice. I really don’t want to fight you, Rion-chan.”

In contrast to the Beast Lord, who looked entirely unfazed despite practically courting death, Rion, who was desperately struggling to pull her sword back, was sweating like a waterfall. Could this actually be called a fight? Who was winning? No one could tell. The only thing that seemed obvious was that Rion’s sword was going to pierce Leonhart’s throat very soon if the situation continued.

“Don’t worry, Rion-chan. Even if I die, you’ll still be the winner.”

“That’s not...the issue...here!”

“Well, you can’t have it all, Rion-chan. The only other thing you

can do is...surrender, isn't it?"

Just as Rion was on the verge of tears, a single ray of hope was delivered to her in a sugary voice. The smile on Leonhart's face slowly turned into a smirk as he recommended the words that would cause Rion's downfall, and yet they sounded oh so sweet to her ears. Finally, the sword tip reached his white, unblemished throat, drawing blood.

"I surrender! I surrendeeer!"

"Oh, you do?"

"Ouch!"

The Beast King suddenly let go of the sword, causing Rion, who had been pulling back with all her strength, to fall back onto her rear end.

"Did you hear that, Ronove? I won! Yay! Announce it, announce it!"

"Huh? Oh, uh, right. Um, Rion-sama has announced her surrender! Therefore, the final match of Block B goes to 'Reflector' Leonhart Gaun! But personally, I can't accept this!"

What followed the declaration of the Beast King's victory was a storm of not cheers and applause but booing and jeering.



The cries of displeasure from the crowds were still going. Considering the things they were shouting at the king of their own country, freedom of speech was clearly not a problem in Gaun. And for his part, the Beast King was acting like a heel on stage.

What is this, professional wrestling?

"I'm so sorry, Kel-nii. I even promised to meet you in the finals..."

"I'm sorry too, dearest brother. I should have foreseen the Beast King using this tactic."

As soon as Rion returned, she and Shutola came to apologize to me, both looking very down.

Gerard stood up. "Rion, Shutola, wait here. I will go and deliver that monster divine punishment with my own hands—"

I raised an eyebrow. "Do you think you can cut down the Beast King when he looks like Shutola, Gerard?"

"Ugh, that's..." Gerard looked so furious that he seemed about to assassinate Leonhart right then and there, so I stopped him before he did anything stupid...especially since he would be at even more of a loss than Rion in the same situation.

"All I can say is, I'm sorry about my old man," Sabato offered awkwardly.

Goma bowed. "Please allow us to apologize on behalf of our father. We are truly sorry for what he did."

"Nah, it's nothing for you two to apologize for. The Beast King

didn't break any of the tournament rules—what he did does count as a tactic. He managed to poke Rion exactly where she's weakest. Rion, the cost of tuition was high, but you took something away from the match, right? You know what you have to work on next, right?"

"Mm..."

If the Beast King had gone on the offensive, Rion would probably have been able to put up a fight in spite of his appearance. This time, he had used nonresistance as a weapon to get to Rion's heart. There were a number of other approaches Rion could have taken, such as trying to knock him out without hurting him, but she got tunnel vision. As her older brother, I very much wanted her to treasure her kindness, but I did not want it to be something that would handicap her in critical moments.

"Why aren't you angry about this?" Sera asked indignantly. "The way the Beast King fought was clearly against the intent of the tournament!"

"I *am* angry."

"Why not?! Rion is— Wait, you are? You only have this blank look on your face."

"Oh, I'm angry all right."

Whether I was angry or not was a different matter altogether. I was grateful to Leonhart for showing Rion what she needed to work on. However, the crime of bullying Rion, my little sister, definitely needed to be paid back one hundredfold. The only thing on my mind at the moment was what I was going to do to him when we met in the finals. If he was going to fight "within the rules," then I was going to have to respond in kind and go the full mile.

"Heh heh heh, I'll enchant my swords with both Vortex Edge and Ground Cleave. Since he can be healed anyway, I'll slice off pieces of flesh while taking an arm..."

"Ahh...okay, yep, let's leave him alone for now. Efil, come with me."

"Understood, Sera-san. Master, I wish you all the best."

Sera and Efil stood back as if to give me space.

"Kel-nii?"

Rion made to approach me, but Sera held her back. "Stop, Rion! Don't get any closer. If you do, your Absolute Purification will erase his anger."

"Whaaat? But I don't want revenge. And I feel bad for Goma-chan!"

"Ah, don't worry about us, Rion-san. I spend every day trying to think of ways to make my father pay too."

"No complaints from me either! Our old man is the freaking Beast King. I'm sure he knows his actions come with consequences."

Sera nodded. “Even I would want to beat him to a pulp if I met him on stage!”

“Well, now you’ve heard everyone’s opinions,” Mel said, pulling Rion’s hand. “What do you say to visiting some food stalls and joining me in eating some good meat? It’s meat! Whenever something bad happens, meat will make you feel better!”

“Meat?! Mel-sama, I’m coming too!” cried Ruka.

“It’s important to maintain a balanced diet, Mel-nee! And now you’re influencing Ruka too!”

Rion was almost forcibly dragged out by Melfina, with Ruka tagging along. I hoped it would serve as a good distraction to get her mind off things.

Just as I was about to dive back into my thoughts using Parallel Processing, Shutola came over to me.

“Dearest brother, may I sit next to you?”

“Hm? Aren’t you going with Rion and Mel? I think it’d make Rion happy if you did.”

“I want to, but I’m also feeling angry at the Beast King for using my appearance to corner Rion-chan and angry with myself for not seeing it coming. So I will continue watching the matches with you. Even though I might not be much help this far into the tournament, I still want to contribute somehow.”

Resolve gleamed in her eyes, almost as if the general of the Black Ops were shining through for a moment. Or perhaps this strong sense of responsibility was something that had been inside her all along. Regardless of what she said, however, I did not fault her in the slightest for what had happened. I looked to Gerard for advice, and he nodded, crossing his arms.

“Okay. The next match is Sera’s, and she’s up against Bahl, someone we know almost nothing about. Tell me if you notice something or if anything comes to mind. I’m counting on you, Shutola.”

“Thank you, dearest brother!”

“Well, I’ll be winning anyway, so there’s no need to get too worked up about it,” Sera announced. “All right, it’s about time, so I’m heading off!”

Shutola and I watched her ponytail disappear through the door as she departed for the final match of Block C.



Sera and Bahl were already standing on stage. They had bumped into each other in the passage on the way up—Bahl had taken a wrong turn, but Sera was tactful enough not to mention it—and walked out together. Along the way, Sera kept talking to Bahl, but the

stranger only replied with offhanded “Mm”s and “I see”s. However, she never ignored Sera outright, so Sera just kept chattering on, which continued even when they reached the stage.

Suddenly, Bahl asked, “Why do you seem so irritated? Can you stop? I’m catching your vibes here. If you don’t feel like fighting, it’ll save us both time if you surrender.”

“Oh, you can tell? But in a way, me being irritated is making me even more eager to fight! Something just happened with my little sister, so I’m raring to go!”

“If you say so. Just make sure you change gears once the fight starts.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice!”

Sera looked a little happy about finally getting a proper reply, even if it was a negative comment. On the other hand, Bahl looked somewhat sullen. Every time she tapped the ground with the tips of her greaves, a soft metallic sound rang out.

“The cheering in the venue has reached the loudest it’s been all day! Of course it has! Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Sera versus Bahl, a card so pleasant to the eyes that even I, a woman, cannot help but stare in fascination!”

“Ugh, I don’t think I can watch this match...”

“Because they’re both women? Yujil, get over it already.”

With both contestants on stage, Ronove started rousing the crowd as she always did.

Bahl clicked her tongue. “They’re still getting my name wrong.”

“What? Your name?”

“Nah, it’s nothing.” Bahl averted her eyes awkwardly.

“Now that the excitement in the air has reached a fever pitch, it’s time to get this show on the road! It looks like both contestants are ready, so here goes! Final match of Block C, ready... FIGHT!”

The barrier surrounding the stage instantly shuddered from an incredible shock wave, then a second, then a third, then even more in quick succession—every time one of Sera’s punches met one of Bahl’s kicks.

“Oh hey, you’re not bad!”

“Is that all you got?”

“As if!”

The blows, blocks, strikes, parries, and shock waves chained into each other in a natural flow. However, each and every attack was so heavy that the stage was already beginning to scream with the strain of it, and the protective barrier remained constantly activated. All Ronove could see were two red streaks colliding again and again in a display far beyond her understanding. At this point, there was only one thing she knew for certain.

“Get a new stage prepared NOW! HURRY!”

A certain middle-aged man in the stands collapsed to his knees, hot tears of dismay streaming down his face. At the same time, more than a few spectators began clapping their hands over their ears in what was ultimately a futile attempt to block out the thunderous roars caused by the unending barrage of shock waves. More impressive than the sound, however, was the speed of what was going on. Even the playback machine created and developed by Kilito could only pick up indistinct blurs. There was nothing to commentate on.

“Yah!”

“Rah!”

Another large crack ran through the stage. In the brief amount of time since the start of the match, an uncountable number of clashes had already taken place. Impressively, although one would have expected Sera’s gauntlets and Bahl’s greaves to shatter on the first blow, they were all somehow still in one piece, despite being worn down very rapidly.

With both being masters of close-quarters combat, the ways in which Sera and Bahl fought bore great similarities but were fundamentally different. Sera, who had the larger build, mainly used her fists and had a very stable and grounded style that focused on speed. In contrast, Bahl made up for her stature by using a style that focused on kicks which gave her significant reach and enabled her to imbue each and every attack with shattering destructiveness. The two red-haired girls were striking in their differences and yet somehow managed to mesh perfectly, bringing about a very delicate equilibrium.

“Ha, ha ha! Not many people can get me this fired up! You really are good!”

“You’re free to go crazy all you want, but can you not drag me into it?”

For the first time since the start of the match, the two combatants’ figures were properly visible. Sera’s right fist and Bahl’s right foot were locked together, vying for supremacy. Sera had a smile from ear to ear, clearly enjoying the white-hot battle, while her opponent maintained her usual cool expression.

Rummmble. Crack. Crackkk!

Even though the two girls were successfully resisting each other, the same could not be said of the stage. As with all the other stages, this one was slowly but surely breaking apart.

“Come on, hang out with me a bit longer. It isn’t often I get to go all out!”

The instant the equilibrium was broken, Sera sent Bahl flying. The latter pressed the tip of her greaves to the ground, raising showers of

sparks as she slid to a halt.

“Well then, that should do for the warm-up stretches. Now I’m ready to kick things up a notch!”

“Fine by me. I’m all warmed up too.”

Sera’s chest swelled with anticipation, but then she noticed a change in Bahl’s greaves.

The tips have gotten sharper from the friction! Which reminds me, when we were probing each other just now, her feet were constantly generating sparks. So she was sharpening the tips by rubbing them against the stage this entire time!

“You noticed? There’s a perfect whetstone beneath our feet, so I helped myself. Well then, are you ready for the real fight?”

Bahl stabbed the tip of one greave into the ground, then lifted a cuboid piece of the stage several times larger and heavier than herself. Because she had done this almost instantaneously, the audience first gasped at the crater that suddenly appeared in the stage, then gasped once more at the gigantic mass the girl was holding above her head.

“And there I was, wondering why you seemed to be tracing the ground!”

“Eat this.”

Bahl brought her foot down in Sera’s direction, sending the giant projectile flying faster than the eye could follow.

“Child’s play!”

Sera’s horizontal hand chop deflected the cube and sent it flying towards the barrier. With it gone, her field of vision opened back up, revealing the butchered stage. However, Danger Detection was strongly warning her to stay wary.

“Piercing Purge.”

Bahl sent a front kick in Sera’s direction with her toes outstretched. The other girl instinctively stepped to the side in evasion of something that quickly closed the distance. Immediately afterwards, she felt a sharp pain in her cheek and blood oozing out from a long cut.

That was pretty fast. Looks like she’s capable of sending a flying attack like Gerard’s Agito using her feet. What a neat trick. In her case, it’s not a slicing attack but a penetrative one like a spear thrust.

Sera wiped off the blood with the back of her hand. She had correctly guessed the nature of the attack based on the pain she felt. However, things were far from over just because she had dodged it once. A second, third, and then even more spear-like attacks rushed at her in quick succession. It was nigh impossible to read their trajectories, as they were invisible, but she managed to ride out the barrage thanks to intuition alone, suffering only minor scratches.

“Tch.”

Naturally, Bahl was less than pleased with the result. After realizing how sharp Sera's intuition was, she stabbed a foot into another huge fragment of the stage nearby and lifted it up, pointing it in Sera's direction. Then she leaped off the other foot, whirling furiously while flying through the air. The more she spun, the more violent, powerful, and terrifying the stone cube became, turning into a gigantic firing hammer.

BA-BOOOOOOOM!

All of a sudden, the enormous makeshift hammer shattered. Sera had thrown a punch directly into the attack, absolutely pulverizing what was supposed to be a hard mass. All that was left was Bahl driving an attack downward from the sky and Sera looking upwards to intercept it.

"That sure hurt!"

"You say it like...you're not hurting me too!"

The pair's attacks landed even before they finished speaking. Sera's powerful fist drove deeply into Bahl's left thigh as her opponent's viciously sharp greave pierced her left shoulder. Neither of them let out a scream, either because they were putting on a tough front or simply did not want to admit weakness.

Whoosh.

Sera threw a follow-up attack, but Bahl kicked off her and dodged it in midair, throwing two Piercing Purges to cover her retreat. When she landed, however, a frown flashed across her face and she shot a look at her left thigh, finding it dyed with blood—blood that wasn't her own.

"I have to say, pretty well done managing all that in midair even with your left leg trapped. Who are you, Rion? Or what, do you have wings?"

The blood was Sera's, of course. And in a lucky coincidence, one of the attacks that Bahl had failed to control properly had landed directly on her abdomen. The blood staining her black outfit was proof of that. However, in the grand scheme of things, this was not a particularly significant development. Sera seemed entirely fine, and it wasn't hard to see why, considering the wound she had suffered to her cheek at the start of the match had already healed without a trace. Even when she received a fatal attack, she could easily use her Unique Skill, Bloodbending, to instantly seal the wound, after which it would naturally heal thanks to Auto Heal, a skill she owned at Rank S.

"Ah, the rumored Blood Dominion. You're not worthy of this power. So, what, do you think you've got this fight in the bag already?"

"As if. You still have something up your sleeve, don't you?"

"You really are sharp. Pisses me off. All right, I'll show you a little

—”

Just as Bahl was starting to show a bit of enthusiasm, she suddenly fell silent. Sera tilted her head quizzically.

“Ugh, could his timing be any worse? Does he actually remember who’s more senior here?”

“What was that?”

“I surrender.”

“Huh?!”

“I said, I surrender.”

The cheering in the venue died down like a switch had been turned off.

“Um, Bahl-sama? Did I mishear? Did you just say you surrender?” Ronove asked hesitantly.

“How many times do I have to repeat myself? Announce it already.”

Sera flared up. “What do you think you’re doing?! Our match isn’t over yet! I can’t accept this!”

“Don’t worry, we’ll meet again soon,” Bahl replied. “And neither you nor I can actually get serious about fighting within this tournament’s rules, right? That’s no fun.”

“Meet...again? What do you mea—”

CRAAASH.

With seemingly perfect timing, Sera’s and Bahl’s equipment crumbled and fell with a loud, metallic crash, interrupting her protest. Both had reached the limits of their durability.

“It won’t be long, I promise you. Take the little time you have left to polish your skills, Sera Baal.”

The red-haired girl walked off the stage with Sera’s blood still on her leg.



“And that’s what she said before she left. What *was* that?!”

Sera sighed, her head propped on one hand, and took a large swig of the drink Efil had made for her. She had been grumbling for some time about the way her opponent had thrown in the towel. She seemed to have finally gotten her frustration out, but that wasn’t the part I took issue with. The biggest problem was the fact that Bahl knew Sera’s family name. *And since we’re on the topic, I might as well say this: I can bet you her name isn’t Bahl, but Baal.*

“I mean, Sera...she’s clearly related to you somehow. She’s probably your little sister or something. I mean, this is *my* first time learning that your family name is Baal.”

I do remember her suggesting it during the conference to decide on which family name I would adopt. Why didn’t she just mention this back

then?

"I didn't think it would be important. And, you know, my family name is going to be C-Celsius soon enough, right?"

The way she suddenly blushed and averted her eyes is way too cute! Don't worry, I'm doing my best to make it a reality! Seriously!

"Ahem. Anyway, why do you think she's my little sister? I'm an only child."

"Why doesn't it seem obvious to you? She shares your fiery red hair, sharp eyes, proficiency with close-quarters combat, and... Honestly, there are way too many points of commonality to list. If I didn't know anything and someone told me you two were siblings, I would totally take it at face value."

Of course, the one point of difference is their chests. Oh right, the hair accessory that Bahl was wearing was most likely a Clip of Camouflage. Gah, I should have properly checked it out with Analyze Eye when I had the chance.

"You mentioned before that Demon Lord Gustav hid you away and raised you in secret, right? It wouldn't be all that weird for you to have a little sister who was similarly hidden away. And I guess no one ever got around to telling you about her existence before the Hero arrived."

I can totally see Gustav doing that, considering how much of a doting parent he is.

"I share Master's opinion," Efil said as she refilled Sera's now-empty cup. "Bahl-san looks extremely similar to you, Sera-san."

"Does she? Mm...I can't really tell, myself."

"I too agree with my king. And this Bahl has great talent as a grandchild! I can feel it!"

How does someone have talent as a grandchild? I know she looks similar in age to Rion, but Sera herself had been alive hundreds of years ago before she was locked away. Even if Bahl is a mere acquaintance of hers and not her little sister, the amount of time that's passed would make her an old grandma. In the first place, it'd be strange for her to even still be alive. Does she have a way of stopping the clock on her body? Of course, there's always the possibility that she was frozen in time just like Sera was and then freed somehow.

"Sera, what happens to the average demon after a hundred or two hundred years? What's the average life span?"

"Well, according to your Analyze Eye, Viktor was 670 years old, so you can draw your own conclusions from that. Also, we're all collectively called demons, but there are many different races. Those with a humanoid form like me and my father stop growing at a certain age and then keep their appearances for the rest of their lives. I suppose we're rather similar to elves in that regard. The point at

which we stop growing differs from person to person, though. By the way, I've already stopped, so I'll always look the way I do now!"

Hm? Didn't she mention before that her chest is still growing? Is that considered a separate thing? Ahem... So, there's a chance Bahl is actually a demon who was never bound but just stopped growing after reaching her current appearance.

"Oh no... I feel so bad for Bahl-chan..." Rion murmured.

"Why?"

Ah, Rion's thinking the same thing I am, but Sera looks completely mystified. I can feel Rion resonating with Bahl's plight, but don't worry—your big brother doesn't discriminate based on chest size! And also, with what's happening to Sera, I believe there's still a sliver of a chance for a miracle to occur.

A question suddenly occurred to me, so I turned to Melfina. Due to the nature of the question, however, I shifted to telepathy.

Melfina, as the Goddess, would you happen to know anything? That you can tell us, I mean.

::Hmm...as I said before, Demon Lord Gustav was before my time. Elearis was the Goddess of Reincarnation back then. All I know is from the records that were passed down, and they don't say much.::

Aww, I was hoping there would be something.

::What I can tell you is that throughout the entirety of my term, I've never heard of this Bahl girl. Normally, someone as strong as her would become world-famous even if they didn't want to be.::

An overwhelmingly powerful person who technically doesn't exist in recent history. It's almost as if she just recently appeared in this wor—Hold on, Melfina. This isn't what I think it is, right?

::What a coincidence, honey. I was thinking the very same thing.::

Ooookay. Well, it wouldn't hurt to keep our guard up against Bahl. The parting line that Sera mentioned still bothers me too.

"Sera-nee, what is Bahl-chan like? Do you think I can be friends with her?"

"Oh, she's a really nice girl! She seemed cold but still listened attentively when I talked. And most importantly, she's really strong!"

"I knew it! As expected of someone with such talent as a grandchild!"

Mm, okay, I've got to start by letting my companions know so we can prepare ourselves.

"By the way, honey, Dahak's match is next, but I don't see him around. Has he already left?"

"Hm? Yep, he did. He was so excited it looked like he was literally on fire."



While Kelvin and Melfina were exchanging opinions, Dahak was busy wandering around the arena grounds with a certain goal in mind. That goal eventually led him to peek through the crack in the door of a certain room in the infirmary.

“Here, hon, eat up!”

“Oh no, sister dear, the apples you peel are simply too delicious! They’ll make me fat!”

“Oh, you sure know what to say to make me happy. I may not be quite as deft with a knife as Efil-chan, but I’m still quite good, am I not? Being able to bring out the best in an ingredient is a sign of a good woman.”

Goldiana was in the middle of peeling an apple and feeding it to Grostina slice by slice. Strange enough, it almost seemed as if Grostina’s skin was turning smoother and glossier with each piece. A storm of rafflesias bloomed inside the room, generating a scene so stimulating that it would undoubtedly be banned from broadcast.

“Th-That baldy! How dare he! There are even roses in the background!”

Dahak’s brain, however, was converting the scene before him into one of a beautiful man and woman flirting with each other and the grotesque flowers in the background into vivid red roses.

“The only other man who’s possibly a good enough match for Prettia-chan is the old man, and yet this clown shows up out of nowhere! Shit! Brother, you didn’t give him enough of a beating!”

Although Kelvin had not been fighting Grostina with such ulterior motives in mind, Dahak, who held overwhelming respect for his “brother,” was mentally bending things to his own perception. He simply could not forgive Grostina, who was now monopolizing Goldiana’s care and attention before even Gerard, whom he saw as his greatest rival.

“I’ve really gotta show Prettia-chan that I’m a man who can get things done in the next match! I don’t have the leeway to be picky with my methods. Luckily, brother gave me permission to play my ultimate card. I’m sorry, old man, but Prettia-chan’s heart will be mine!”

From his position behind the door, Dahak clenched his fists with resolve. If his love bore fruit, his “rival” would actually throw both hands up in celebration, but things rarely worked out that well.

Looks like Dahak-chan’s all fired up. But hon, I’m not an easy woman, mkay?

Upon sensing Dahak’s presence, Goldiana smiled confidently. Clearly, Gerard and Dahak’s path was going to be one filled with briars.

“The stage has! Been! Replaced! It’s time for the final match of

Block D! Goldiana-sama and Dahak-sama, please make your way to the stage! And if possible, please don't break this one!"



"This is the very last block of the quarterfinals!" Ronove announced in an excited voice. "Will it be Goldiana-sama who makes it to the semifinals, or Dahak-sama, the hooligan wielding a large hammer?!"

"Who the fuck you calling a hooligan, huh?!" Dahak roared in response, demonstrating the answer to his own question. Kelvin and his companions shook their heads at the dragon's display of his characteristic short temper.

"Well then, Dahak-chan. Have you worked out all your strategies yet? I'm sorry to say this, but you don't stand a chance coming at me head-on. You'd have to be at least on par with Gerard-sama the way he is right now to do something like that."

While completely different in size, Goldiana's weapon of choice was exactly the same as Sera's: knuckle-dusters. She was wearing a full-body pink skintight suit that would normally have left Dahak staring in a daze, but the black dragon was different now. He was looking directly at his opponent, his mind completely in battle mode. He seemed a different person from the one who had yelled at Ronove moments before.

"I know that. I hate to admit it, but I'm nowhere near as beautiful as you or the old man. But a man's worth isn't only in his looks! I'll use everything at my disposal to win this fight, Prettia-chan!"

Dahak hoisted his large hammer onto his shoulder and thrust his left hand out. Goldiana nodded in satisfaction at his reply and assumed a battle-ready stance as well. The way she held both hands up higher than her shoulders made her already-large build look even larger and more threatening.

Damn, I feel like I'm standing in front of sister Sera when she's in a rage.

Unlike all the other matches so far, Goldiana was no longer smiling with composure. She looked straight at Dahak, giving him her undivided attention. Dahak's passion had at least been enough to make her take this battle seriously.

"Final match of Block D... Ready... FIGHT!"

The instant the starting signal was given, Dahak leaped backwards as fast as he could and yelled, "GO FOR IT! ALL OF YOU!"

"Oh my!"

Ocher-colored plants burst out from the lawn in all directions around the stage, instantly interweaving and becoming one. What the audience and commentators saw was a dome made of plants abruptly

appearing in a cloud of dust to conceal the stage from sight.

“A mysterious covering has appeared! Now we can’t see the match?!” Ronove cried on behalf of the spectators. Indeed, the plant dome blocked even sunlight, making it impossible for anyone on the outside to see in. Now there was no way to tell what was actually happening on stage.

I see... Dahak-chan started by cutting off my sense of sight.

With the sun blocked, both Goldiana and Dahak were in a world of absolute darkness. She could not even see her own hands, much less her opponent. But Dahak, who had the eyes of a dragon, could see just fine in the dark.

BA-BOOOOM!

Dahak swung his large hammer horizontally at Goldiana’s side.

“What?!”

The unexpected angle and darkness should have made the destructive blow a complete surprise, but moments before landing, the weapon had been stopped, both ends of its head crushed. Goldiana had brought her elbow down and knee up in what was known as an elbow-knee pincer to thoroughly destroy Dahak’s weapon.

“It’s true that I can’t see, hon, but I don’t only rely on my eyes to perceive what’s going on around me. I don’t even need to use Sixth Sense to pick up on a surprise attack like that.”

A scream of metal filled the air as the hammer’s head was crushed flat. Instantly understanding that it would be impossible to retrieve his weapon, Dahak opted to let go and retreat. *The fight just started and I’ve already lost my weapon. But that’s okay; I knew this would happen.*

Crush!

Soon enough, Goldiana had finished flattening the large hammer. Although she could see nothing, her fighting prowess remained the same as before. She started walking slowly, using every part of her body to take in all available information about her surroundings. *This strange odor and the way the air is moving... Dahak-chan must be unleashing a gas of some sort.*

The moment she took her first step, she felt the air inside the dome moving—there were four currents flowing towards her from different directions, bringing with them a foul fragrance that burned her nose. Her long years of experience helped her determine it to be poison, so she held her breath. That was indeed the right call, as Dahak had caused four huge carnivorous plants to sprout from the stage. The red flower buds, which were lined with razor-sharp teeth, stretched towards Goldiana while spewing deadly poison.

Dahak himself was impervious to the toxins, as he was growing plants within his own body that were releasing a neutralizing agent. *It pisses me off to rely on the same thing as that baldy, but I’ve decided to do*

everything I can! It looks like Prettia-chan started holding her breath, but I doubt she can keep that up for too long!

Goldiana closed her eyes and focused on sensing her surroundings. *Gosh, how long has it been since I trained how to fight without breathing? This sure brings me back. Hmm, given how long it's been since I last did this, I think I'll only be able to last thirty minutes or so. Well, come on. I'm waiting!*

The bud of one of the plants abruptly whipped around and rushed towards her, with the others following suit in quick succession. But just before the first one made contact, a loud *crack* rang out as Goldiana flicked a finger. Squishing noises sounded out in the darkness—not a metallic sound like when the hammer was crushed, but a raw sound that brought to mind something living.

Dahak's eyes took in the sight of the Rank A plants generated by his Unique Skill, Gemmation, being torn to pieces. Just before one of them reached Goldiana, she grabbed it by its open mouth, held it down, crushed it, then continued raining blows down on it until it was reduced to scraps.

She's not moving based on intuition like sister Sera does. No, her actions are sure and precise. Does she actually have Night Vision?!

In the midst of everything, Goldiana was still making her way towards Dahak's position. He wanted a drawn-out battle, so he continued retreating and raising carnivorous plants from the ground.

Unfortunately, doing so led to an opening.

“Ugh!”

It was a mistake to assume that Goldiana did not possess any long-distance attacks. In the middle of fighting the plants, she shot a lump of air from her fingertip, a move she called Bee Stylet, that opened a hole in the dragon's abdomen. Unlike when she had fought Goma, Goldiana did not hold back this time. The attack was focused on a single point instead of spread out over a large area, taking on its true form as an extremely fast attack designed for penetration.

Oh? He's more tenacious than I expected.

Without missing a beat, Dahak had grown a restorative plant with elastic properties and wrapped it around his torso to stop the bleeding. While doing this, he kept up the assault, indicating how badly he was pushing his mental capacity. However, he had no time to feel sorry for himself. With every moment that passed, Goldiana drew closer. The black dragon gritted his teeth at the pain in his stomach while guiding his opponent into the next trap he had prepared.

Oh my, my feet!

Just as he had done while fighting Akgas, Dahak had planted vines on the floor to cling to Goldiana's feet. Of course, no matter how tough the vines were, they would not be able to stop her for even a

moment. However, that was fine with him. All he needed was to redirect her attention for a split second.

Flash!

Jade-green light exploded within the darkness of the dome as Dahak unleashed a breath attack. A searing stream shot out from his mouth and landed directly on Goldiana, melting the stage along the length of its path. Even the carnivorous plants withdrew in order to avoid becoming collateral damage.

Oh, I like this! A straightforward attack with no thought of defense! Oh, this really does pull at my heartstrings!

Goldiana's brain registered the pain from her burned hands as her knuckle-dusters fell away, having been reduced to useless lumps of melted metal when she'd used them to block the incoming attack. This was the first time she had ever gotten hurt in the Gaunian tournament. The dragon breath, which had lasted more than ten seconds, had definitely left its mark. When it died down, darkness immediately returned to the inside of the dome and the carnivorous plants resumed their onslaught.

It's...about time, I would say. Dahak-chan's being very obvious in dragging this out, so I've got to break out of this situation.

A pink aura gathered around Goldiana's right hand.

"Wh—?!"

Dahak suddenly trembled with a spike of pure terror. The inside of the dome was now painted pink by the light emanating from Goldiana's fist. The plants continued attacking without regard, but a single swing from his opponent was all it took to obliterate them.

She suddenly got even more beautiful!

Dahak had listened to Kelvin's account of Grostina, Goldiana's junior disciple, displaying special powers using an aura-based ability. In Grostina's case, the aura increased the defensiveness of the parts it enveloped, granted adhesiveness, and became capable of storing and expressing poison. All clues pointed to this aura being a technique from Goldia, the martial arts practiced by the pair. Goldiana definitely knew how to use it as well—in fact, Kelvin had even seen her use it in person before—so Dahak had been expecting it. However, it turned out to be much more powerful than he had thought. And now, Goldiana's left leg was lighting up with a clump of energy that was shining light pink.

It's coming!

His mind became filled with his own voice. Should he retaliate with more carnivorous plants? Should he—no, *could* he manage to keep running about until Goldiana was tapped out? Should he charge straight in from the front? An almost overwhelming number of options flashed through his mind, but he dismissed them all right off the bat.

As someone who had been born capable of perceiving strength as beauty, he could tell instinctively that none of the ideas he was coming up with would work. That left only one thing he could do.

Goldiana kicked off the ground and disappeared, leaving a new crater on the stage. No, she did not disappear—she was already right in front of him, distance meaning nothing to her brawny legs. Her rising fist was the ultimate attack, capable of reducing any target to mere splatters with a tiny scratch. During the briefest of moments, Goldiana's and Dahak's eyes met, with the former's eyes seeming to ask, "Is this all your passion amounts to?"



At the same time, it was all quiet outside the dome. There was no change on stage, which meant there was nothing to get excited about. The spectators and commentators had nothing to do but stare at the plant canopy. Despite all the action going on inside, those on the outside were truly at a loss for topics to talk about.

"I, uh, still don't see any change," Ronove said in a troubled tone.

"Well, the dome is covering everything," Yujil replied. "It's literally as large as it can be without touching the barrier surrounding the stage."

"In all likelihood, this is Dahak's power. With the dome isolating even sound, we have no choice but to continue to wait and see," Jereol said matter-of-factly.

"So you say, Jereol-sama, but this is supposed to be the final match of the block!" Ronove wailed. "If it stays like this, the audience—Huh?"

Large cracks suddenly appeared on the surface of the dome, cutting Ronove short. Everyone's eyes were glued to the stage where there was finally movement for the first time since the start of the match.

"Ladies and gentlemen, are you seeing this?! The dome has been cracked!" Ronove shouted, instantly returning to her role as commentator. The speed at which she recovered illustrated clearly why she was so highly sought after in her industry.

"No, that's not all—"

"It's breaking apart!"

Immediately after Jereol's shout, the dome began to collapse. The structure that had shown no sign of budging earlier had suddenly started caving in along the lines of the cracks. The collapsing dome parts were not simply hitting the ground, though.

"Th-Th-That's a dragon! Where's Dahak-sama?!"

The pitch-black dragon that had been revealed by the collapsing dome was actually taking in the falling fragments and using them to

form an armored layer over its black scales. Standing across from the dragon was Goldiana, who had one arm and one leg clad in a blinding whirlwind of light pink.

“My oh my! I confess, I did not expect you to withstand a serious attack from me when I’m in this form.”

“I could say the same of you, Prettia-chan. I had to break the dome to use it to protect myself on the spot. This is the toughest plant material I know of, but you still managed to shave it down. Just how much of an angel *are* you?”

Of course, the enormous dragon was Dahak in his original form. There was a large hole in the yellow ocher armor on his abdomen, and although the wound was not too deep, blood was definitely flowing out. As the remainder of the dome fell apart, the pieces all flew towards this hole, repairing the armor by sealing it back up.

“Mmmm! Fresh air! Finally.”

The poison that had been closed in by the dome now dissipated, becoming purified on contact with the barrier around the stage. By turning into a dragon, Dahak had barely managed to withstand Goldiana’s attack, but doing so had cost him his efforts to restrict Goldiana’s vision and drag the match out. However, becoming a dragon was his trump card, and there were options available to him only when he was in this form.

“Oh my, did those get even more brutal than before?”

Two carnivorous plants had sprouted from the area behind Dahak’s wings on his back. Unlike the ones Goldiana had previously destroyed, rather than buds, these were in full bloom, with hundreds of teeth lining the inside of the flowers.



“My Black Soil Scales are the ultimate seedbed for plants. You’re gonna be in a world of hurt if you think these are the same as the ones I grew using the barren dirt under the stage! Here goes!”

The plants rushed forward as if shot by a gun, displaying a speed and ferocity that far exceeded that of the ones previously mass-produced from the stage. Even the poison they emitted while rushing at Goldiana was significantly more lethal than before.

What Dahak had grown from his own body was called Seed of Calamity. It was a very particular plant that only grew in absolute darkness in Abyssland, the place where demons lived. Once it sprouted, it would tear into anything and anyone its master considered an enemy. It was said that a fully mature plant could devour even an archdemon, and there were entire countries in Abyssland that had been destroyed by the species. Cultivating it was extremely difficult, with many who attempted to do so being eaten by the very flowers they were growing. However, Dahak’s Black Soil Scales enabled him to skip through all that and instantaneously produce not just one, but *two* of them in their fully mature form.

Looks like I should probably go back to holding my breath. The barrier isn’t capable of purifying all the poison these new flowers are producing.

Thanks to the barrier surrounding the stage, there was no worry of the poison reaching the spectators on the other side. However, when there was more poison than could be purified, the overflow would remain within the barrier. In other words, the poisonous environment from the dome was being reproduced, with the one difference being that everything was now fully visible.

Goldiana’s situation was dire. The plants kept up a relentless onslaught, drawing blood wherever the teeth made contact with any part of her body not protected by the aura while Dahak shot breath attacks from the back whenever there was the slightest opening. The destruction caused by those breaths was on a whole other level from what his human form produced. When they hit the stage, it melted; when they fell on the surrounding lawn, the grass was reduced to ash. Even Goldiana would not get away unharmed if any of the attacks scored a clean hit.

“My, I can’t remember how long it’s been since I’ve had such passionate love directed at me! Dahak-chan, you’ve earned this—burn the sight of my Rose Ishtar into your mind!” Goldiana slowly declared and laughed, despite being in a situation where she hardly had time to breathe.

In Dahak’s eyes, it was the smile of a goddess. In everyone else’s eyes, however...

“Ah, that’s Peach Ogre indeed,” Jereol muttered to himself. “I

didn't expect to see that form before the next round."

The fight ended right afterwards, determining the last person who would be moving on to the semifinals.



The infirmary in the Gaun Mixed Fighting Arena was once again fulfilling its role as a place of recuperation for contestants who had gotten hurt in a match.

"Archangel?!"

"Oh my, why do you all wake up shouting something? Is this déjà vu?"

"P-Prettia-chan?! Where is..."

When Dahak woke up with an agitated shout, he found a large man—no, woman peeling an apple at his bedside. It was none other than Goldiana Prettiana, the very person he had just been fighting.

"Before anything else, here, eat this for some nourishment," Goldiana said. "You should be able to get this down at least, right?"

"Er... Huh?!"

When Goldiana handed him a bunny-shaped slice of apple, Dahak's brain froze in confusion. Why was he in a place like this? What happened to the match? Why was Goldiana's handmade food (if it could be called that), which he had dreamed about for so long, now in his hand? Why did she always look so beautiful? In short, there were so many thoughts bouncing around his head that it had become overloaded.

"Calm down, Dahak-chan. I'll explain everything. First, this is the arena's infirmary. It's a bit awkward for me to say, but hon, you lost and fell unconscious."

"I...lost, huh? Dammit! I thought I had a chan— Whoa, this is delicious!"

Taking a bite of the crispy apple slice, Dahak raised his voice in surprise. The only other time he had been this shocked by food was while eating vegetables prepared by Efil.

"Did that perk you up? I see you in a new light now, Dahak-chan! I honestly had no intention of using Rose Ishtar at the start. But I felt your feelings so keenly that I just had to respond to them."

"Th-That means—"

"Still, I'm not a woman who'd sell herself short. It's not yet enough to make me turn your way. When you become strong enough to beat Gerard-sama, then I'll give you another chance."

Goldiana seemed to be in a good mood as her large hands continued peeling the apple.

"Me? Beat the old man? Th-That isn't gonna be easy..."

"Can you expect any less?" came another voice. "It's my dear

sister you're pursuing. It only makes sense to settle things with your rival first."

"Wha— You were here the whole time, baldy bastard?!"

"Who're you calling a bastard?!"

Dahak whirled around and found Grostina—who apparently had no issue with being called "baldy"—lying in the bed next to his own.

"I forced myself to go upstairs to watch your fight in spite of my injuries. I didn't expect it from your appearance, but you have a pretty crafty fighting style. I feel like we might get along!"

"I have no intention of getting along with a love rival! Prettia-chan, why do you keep leading this bastard on when you're supposedly pursuing Old Man Gerard?!"

"Hmm? Me, your love rival? I think you're misunderstanding something here. I'm dear sister's younger sister. Our relationship is not what you think."

"Uh...what?"

"Oh my, and here I was wondering why you seemed so hostile towards Grostina. The two of us studied martial arts under the same master. In other words, we're sisters in discipleship. Ronove-chan mentioned it in her introduction. Weren't you listening?"

"I, uh, didn't want to hear it, so I closed my ears. I'm such an idiot!" Dahak clutched his head, then started. He turned towards Grostina, lifted his legs off his bed, stomped the ground like a sumo wrestler, lowered his waist, and bowed deeply. "I'm very sorry! I totally misunderstood! You're too handsome of a man, so I ended up being jealous of you!"

It was a heartfelt apology. However, the gesture itself held the mannerisms of the yakuza.

"What a straightforward man he is!" Grostina exclaimed. "Dear sister, now *I'm* jealous."

Goldiana giggled. "So, what will you do, Grostina?"

Dahak's head was still lowered.

"Raise your head, Dahak-chan," Grostina said.

"Does that mean...you'll forgive me? Wait, why're you laughing?"

"Ha ha ha! Because the misunderstanding was cleared up. We're besties now, aren't we?"

"By which you mean...comrades? I can get behind that!"

The two exchanged a firm handshake. The moment the misunderstanding was gone, a solid friendship blossomed between them. They could understand each other without using too many words.

"Come to think of it, Dahak-chan, you're quite handsome too, in a wild way. If you ever lose interest in dear sister, feel free to chase after me instead!"

“Huh? You high or something? Just saying, you might be a handsome hunk, but I don’t swing that way. Prettia-chan is the only one for me!”

“Gosh, you sure aren’t one to mince words!”

Correction: the two still had things to work out with each other.

Chapter 2: Semifinals

The victors of each block stood in a row on the newly replaced stage. Regardless of what they fought for, be it a just cause, personal gain, love, or anything else, they had all more than proved their right to be there. The audience watched with wide eyes, eagerly catching every detail as the curtains opened on the most exciting part of the Beast King Festival.

“THE FINALS ARE HEEEEERE!” Ronove shouted passionately, to which the audience replied, “YEEEEAAHHHHH!” at an equally thunderous volume.

Kelvin smiled wryly. “They’re still that hyped, huh?”

“Why not? They seem happy!” Sera replied cheerfully.

“I knew I’d get to share this stage with you two, Kelvin-chan, Sera-chan.”

“Looks like you took good care of Dahak just now, Prettia.”

“I hope he didn’t cause you too much trouble, Goldiana?”

“Heavens, no. I had fun fighting him, and he seems to have really hit it off with Gros, my junior disciple. I also owed you for treating me after that fight, so no worries!”

“Thanks. Glad to hear it.”

“Good job, Kelvin! I can’t wait to fight Goldiana in her best state!”

Goldiana had indeed been poisoned while fighting Dahak. After the match, however, Kelvin had generously removed all the poison using White Magic.

“Isn’t everyone a bit too relaxed?” Leonhart, who still looked like Shutola, interjected. He turned towards Kelvin. “Especially you, dear brother. You even went and healed someone you might be fighting soon!”

“I owe you *big* for everything you did to my little sister, Beast King. Now I have to find a way to repay you severalfold.”

“I’m glad to see this isn’t enough to get to you. Personally, I have high hopes for you, Kelvin. I’ll be waiting for you to come at me with all you’ve got. Use everything at your disposal to beat me! Convince my citizens of your strength!”

“My Kelvin will do that without you telling him to!” Sera interrupted. “Don’t underestimate him!”

Leonhart smiled cheerfully. “Mm-hm, I can’t wait!”

“Well, someone seems composed, Leo-chan.”

“And I’m glad to see you doing well too, Prettia-chan. I’d love to chat more with you, but it looks like it’s almost time.”

Everyone turned to look where the Beast King was pointing. A beastkin woman was walking out of one of the contestant entrances, holding a box with a hole on one side. Kelvin recognized the box. It was the same one all the contestants had drawn their lots from to decide the brackets at the start of the tournament.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are going to decide the matchups for the semifinals! Just as we did for the starting brackets, we will be using lots! There are four pieces of paper in the box, labeled one to four. For the semifinals, the pairings will be one versus two and three versus four! Ah, don’t open your papers just yet. We’re going to ask everyone to do that at the same time!”

Just as Kelvin had guessed, they were going to draw lots again. The representatives of Blocks A, B, C, and D—Kelvin, Leonhart, Sera, and Goldiana, respectively—all stepped up in turn. Then, at Ronove’s signal, they opened their pieces of paper and showed them to the beastkin lady, who walked back into the passage.

After a short while, Ronove declared, “We have confirmed the drawings. Ladies and gentlemen, please look at the screen above!”

The magic item floating high above the stage displayed the pairings for the semifinals.

“For the first match, we will be seeing ‘Reflector’ Leonhart Gaun versus ‘Grim Reaper’ Kelvin! And for the second fight, we will be seeing ‘Empress’ Sera versus ‘Peach Ogre’ Goldiana Prettiana! The semifinal brackets have been decided!”

Kelvin got the opportunity to repay his debt right off the bat.



It was time for the first match of the semifinals to begin. However, neither Kelvin nor the Beast King was on stage yet.

Ronove grumbled, “It’s almost time, but I don’t see either contestant. Where could they be?”

“Hmm, they might still be busy preparing,” Jereol replied. “During his last fight, father defeated Kelvin’s sister, Rion, in a manner that can hardly be called respectable. From what I’ve heard, Kelvin dotes on his sister, so I’m sure he’s absolutely furious. Chances of him aiming for revenge through this match are high, I’d say.”

Yujil continued, “And I’m sure father knows that, so he’s making his own preparations. He’s hardly the kind of person to take things lying down.”

“Thank you for the explanations, Jereol-sama, Yujil-sama. In other words, the match has actually already begun— Oh?”

Footsteps sounded from one of the contestant entrances. It was

Kelvin.

“The first one to appear is Kelvin-sama! Just like before, he is holding a longsw— Wait, what?”

When Kelvin walked onto the stage, several things flew out from the same entrance at high speed. There weren’t just one or two of them—no, there were dozens, possibly even a hundred. They drew a parabola in the air before stabbing into the stage by Kelvin’s side.

“Wh-What’s with those black swords?!”

Indeed, the flying projectiles were swords as black as Kelvin’s own outfit and larger than he was tall, making the one currently in his hand look like a mere twig in comparison. Naturally, they had all been made with the Obsidian Edge spell.

“This isn’t against the rules, right?” Kelvin growled. “Since they’re all products of support magic I cast before the start of the match.”

“I mean...technically, yes.” A drop of sweat rolled down Ronove’s face.

Jereol laughed loudly. “Ha ha ha! You’re right in that it’s not against the rules. However, this is the first time in the tournament’s history that someone’s been so blatant about using that loophole.”

“Ronove-san, my father has also appeared.” Despite still being unable to meet Ronove’s eyes, Yujil had at least gotten comfortable enough to address her directly.

Sure enough, a silhouette was emerging from the opposing contestant’s entrance. Ronove grabbed her sound-projection magic item.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Leonhart-sama has also arrived! This time, who will he look—”

The sunlight falling on the coliseum illuminated the Beast King’s figure.

“I will be in your care, Master.”

“I-It’s a maid! His Majesty looks like a maid this time!”

King Leonhart now looked like Efil in her usual maid uniform. He had reproduced everything about her appearance, including her dignified posture, eyes filled with love and respect for her master, and every last detail of her gestures. And just like last time, he had again showed up entirely empty-handed.

“That’s the archer in Kelvin’s party, I believe.”

“Yes, Jereol. Her alias is Bombing Princess, if I remember correctly. I’ve heard that she was one of the very first members of Kelvin-dono’s party. Father is up to his usual tricks again, it seems.”

“Th-This is going to be another intense match!”

As the commentators talked up a storm, Kelvin and Leonhart both assumed their starting positions on stage.

“So, you’re going with Efil’s appearance this time. Are you sure

you don't need a weapon, Your Majesty?"

"Thank you for your concern, Master. But there is no need to stand on ceremony with me," the Beast King said before closing his eyes and placing a hand on his chest. Without hesitation, as if he believed every word of it, he declared, "After all, I am your slave and your maid."

"I see. In that case, there's nothing left for me to say."

"Understood, Master. Let us have a good match."

"It...appears to me that both contestants are ready to go. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for waiting! Here goes the first semifinal match! Ready... FIGHT!"

Immediately after the starting signal, the Beast King opened his eyes and slowly walked towards Kelvin.

"Master! As your loyal maid, I—"

A black sword shot straight at Leonhart's head, generating a sharp *whoosh* in its wake. He dodged it by a paper-thin margin, but doing so still left a long, red line on his face. The sword buried itself deep in the stage on the other side.

"C'mon, why'd you dodge? I can't split your head open if you do that."

The Beast King's eyes grew sharp for a fraction of a second, but then Efil's usual gentle expression returned.

"I see. Cutting down a mere slave does not pain you. As expected of my master."

"Ha ha! That's the thing—I'm not your master. You're Leonhart, not Efil. It doesn't matter how much you look or act like her—you're still nothing more than an imitator. Not even a perfect one, at that."

"How wonderful." The Beast King held both his hands behind his back like a girl adorably waiting for her date to arrive. "This was extremely effective against Rion-sama, but it doesn't seem to work on you, Master."

"Rion is sweet and kind, after all."

"That sweetness and kindness of hers can become a weakness. I'm sure she understands that, at least in her head. However, when her sword touched my neck, the face of her friend and the weight of the responsibility of killing the king of a country must have clashed with her understanding of this being just a tournament, giving her severe tunnel vision and robbing her of the ability to think straight. The pressure of having to think her way out in such a limited time frame compounded her confusion. It was for the best that this did not occur during a real bat—"

The Beast King leaped back to evade the two giant swords that flew at him this time.

"Oh, I'm thankful for that. I really am, so would you accept these

as tokens of my gratitude?"

Several more Obsidian Edges floated up from the stage and directed their tips at Leonhart.

"What an impressive sight."

"Bring them out already. How long do you plan on staying like that?"

The corners of the Beast King's mouth rose in a smirk as he took his hands from behind his back. They were holding something that looked very out of place in Efil's dainty hands—giant, completely unadorned bastard swords that equaled Gerard's sword, Dainsleif, in size. The mismatch between Efil's figure and the appearance of the two weapons could not have been more stark. Kelvin, however, paid it no mind. Instead, there was now a small smile on his face.

"I knew it. You weren't bare-handed after all. So much for your 'Thank you for your concern, Master.'"

"It is clear to me that you want a fight, Master."

"You figured that out? I'm glad."

Several Obsidian Edges that had been floating above the stage shot out simultaneously, generating thunderous roars and an explosive cloud of dust. The spectators could not see what was happening on stage, but Kelvin could clearly see the Beast King making his way forward, parrying every blade that approached. He had yet to suffer a single wound and was brandishing his swords, which should have been extremely heavy, like they were mere twigs. Eventually, he leaped up high into the air, bursting from the dust cloud as a maid with a giant sword in each hand.

"My blood is pumping like I'm on a battlefield!"

"Oh, you're done with acting like Efil?"

"My apologies, Master!"

Kelvin backed up a step to dodge the sword thrown from Leonhart's right hand. He made sure to also avoid where it landed but did notice something stuck to the weapon.

Is that...a talisman?

A magic circle suddenly spread out from the sword. There was no doubt that it was caused by the talisman, which was likely a product of Toraj, considering it had "封," the kanji for "seal," written on it. Kelvin found his feet seemingly glued to the ground, refusing to do what he wanted. However, this was hardly the only thing that confused him. While thinking of a way to get out of his current predicament, another train of thought under Parallel Processing wrestled with a different question.

Is this talisman the accessory that Leonhart brought for the fight? Wait, but he still looks like Efil. Is he cheating? No, it must mean—

"Do you imagine I'll give you time to think?!"

The Beast King leaped into the air, bringing his remaining sword down from a double-handed overhead stance in an effort to slam Kelvin into the stage.



An incredible force smashed into the stage, splitting it in two and causing the two halves to leap into the air. Eventually, the pieces were pulled back down by gravity, landing with a deafening crash and sending a tremor through the ground. Even though the tiny fragments that flew everywhere did end up getting blocked by the barrier surrounding the area, all of the spectators in the front seats could not help but lift an arm to protect their faces. The rest just stared with their jaws on the floor at the ridiculous scale of destruction caused by that single attack.

“Heh heh heh, what a sneaky trick you had up your sleeve!”

“Having insurance is only a matter of course, right? And stop laughing like that. Efil’s laugh is much cuter.”

The cloud of dust settled, revealing the Beast King and Kelvin locking blades in the gap that had opened up between the two halves of the stage—the former’s sword was being held back by two floating Obsidian Edges in an “X” guard. The power that Kelvin could generate with his jet-black blades was linked to how much MP he had, and this was apparently enough to match that of the Beast King’s.

Before this stage was brought in, I’d cast a Contaminated Mud Bind on its surface and then Concealed it. I never thought he’d start the fight by breaking the stage outright. So much for that now. What a pity.

It was true that the Beast King played dirty, but Kelvin’s tactics were hardly aboveboard either.

“Don’t the rules only allow contestants to bring one accessory? How do you have those talismans *and* still remain transformed?”

“I assure you, I haven’t broken any rules.”

“I knew it. Your transforming schtick isn’t because of some national treasure after all. It’s your Unique Skill, isn’t it?”

“Bingo!”

The swords pushed each other back with a high-pitched metallic screech as the two contestants backed up. The Beast King had somehow already fetched the bastard sword that he had thrown earlier. What’s more, both of the swords in his hands now had talismans stuck to them.

“And how do you explain having *two* talismans?”

“These aren’t separate items. But I suppose you won’t just take my word for it. They’re both part of an item called Divine Sealing Talisman, which Toraj gifted to Gaun when signing the cease-fire that ended the Great War. In addition to what you just experienced, it can

also do this!”

When Leonhart raised one sword high up, the talisman on the blade seemed to blur for a moment before a copy appeared and fluttered to the exposed ground.

“Basically, I can make as many copies of it as there are living beings in my surroundings.”

“As many as—?!” Kelvin shot a look at the stands overflowing with spectators. *Just how many people are there in the coliseum right now?!*

The talisman on the ground suddenly multiplied in number, bursting into the air like a storm of paper confetti.

“That’s...pretty much the perfect item for a venue like this, huh?”

“Oh, is it? I hadn’t noticed. And just saying, every single talisman is quite powerful. I’m sure you understand, having tasted its effect for yourself just now!”

“Well, thank you for the heads-up!”

Even before he finished speaking, Kelvin unleashed the Obsidian Edges that he had surreptitiously been arranging into formation. Leonhart parried the first wave, then sent the cloud of talismans to engulf the rest. The moment a talisman stuck onto an Obsidian Edge, it crashed to the ground as if its weight had suddenly gone up a hundredfold. Several fell right next to Leonhart, raising an earsplitting cacophony.

“Now your swords feel like lead and won’t move, right? This is the power of the talis—”

“That’s all they do? Nah, I’m sure there’s more to them.”

“What?!”

Kelvin rushed towards the Beast King with all the speed he could muster with Sonic Acceleration, charging into the cloud of talismans head-on. The fluttering pieces of paper drew towards him and the weapon in his hand, but every single piece that came near him promptly burst into a thousand scraps as if it had been put into a blender. As soon as he got within range, Kelvin thrust with his longsword. Leonhart managed to block the attack with his two bastard swords, but he felt his weapons being quickly worn down from the contact.

“Well, would you look at that? Those swords of yours are way too tough for being tournament-issued. You’re also using your talismans to boost their sturdiness, aren’t you?”

“Ha ha! Ha ha ha! You really do have a sharp eye!”

The Obsidian Edges were so tough that they would chip even the most famous sword after exchanging so many blows, but Kelvin had even gone so far as to cast Vortex Edge on all of them. There was no way a common sword could stand up to such abuse. The Beast King

might not have lied outright, but Kelvin had also been paying attention to what he *wasn't* saying from the start.

"Here's more."

A fresh wave of Obsidian Edges that numbered in the dozens plunged down from high above, again all clad in Vortex Edge. Upon crashing into the ground, the whirling gales of wind surrounding the blades tore the cloud of talismans apart, reducing them to mere scraps of paper.

"Don't you have a bit too much MP, Master?"

"People tell me that...quite often!"

A furious exchange of sword strikes ensued. The wrecked stage had been made even more precarious by the numerous Obsidian Edges emanating razor-sharp winds that dotted its surface. Kelvin sent even more of the same jet-black swords flying at the Beast King from all four directions as he himself weaved in and out of direct combat. The Beast King gathered all of the Divine Sealing Talismans that had escaped the assault of the winds and deftly used them to deal with the barrage of flying blades while brandishing his own weapons. The vigorously shifting ebb and flow of battle continued for several minutes in a display so fascinating that all the onlookers, commentators included, forgot to speak while transfixed by the replay screen.

"Hmph!"

Leonhart leaped into the air and threw one of his swords again. Kelvin retreated much farther than where he predicted it would land so that he wouldn't fall victim to the effect of the talisman stuck onto it. Then he exhaled to calm his breathing and watched closely as Leonhart landed on top of the hilt of the sword stuck in the ground with the graceful motions of a cat. The hem of his maid uniform fluttered up at the perfect height to reveal the holy area above his thigh-high socks while still protecting what needed to be protected.

"I don't get it. Why'd you have to resort to such dirty methods when fighting Rion if you're so strong?"

"Oh, you wish to chat, Master? I'd be happy to oblige. Um, my fight with Rion-sama, was it? Well, all I did was choose the strategy that would guarantee me the highest chance of victory."

"C'mon, don't give me that shit when you got booed that badly by your own citizens. This tournament is supposed to be a celebration of warriors for warriors, right? If the king acts in such an underhanded way, wouldn't that reflect badly on your own country?"

"I see your point, but this is simply how I carry myself as the Beast King. Hmm...to put it in an extreme way, what other people think of me doesn't affect me in the slightest. It doesn't matter to me even if my children hate me or my people lose faith in me."

Kelvin's incredulous "Huh?!" only evoked a shrug and a look of indifference from the Beast King.

"Thankfully, here in Gaun, the throne is decided by who's the best in a fight, plain and simple. This works out great for me. It doesn't matter how I act; as long as I don't lose in the battle for the throne, I get to keep my crown. Then all that's left is to take measures against assassinations."

"And you're fine with that? As the king of a nation?"

"This is preferable to my people dying for no reason. All they have to do is aim to become stronger and craftier than me. Are you familiar with the era of the Great War on the Eastern Continent? As the countries became exhausted, people deceived each other and malice flooded the land. It was a dark, dark time for the beastkin, gallant and straightforward as they were."

"That's centuries ago, though. What're you talking about?"

"That...is true. I have spoken too much. Master, we are now both tired, having been unsuccessful in landing a decisive blow on each other. What say you to pushing through and deciding this match in the next exchange?"

The few remaining talismans flew over and attached themselves to the Beast King's body in various positions.

"Well...all right, sounds good to me."

Kelvin pulled an Obsidian Edge from the stage with his left hand and lifted it up in readiness with the longsword in his right fist. The glossy surface of the black gauntlet hidden under the sleeve of his similarly black outfit seemed to glint a little for the brief moment it was visible.

"I know you have your own reasons and all, but it's about time I repay your favor. Using Rion's power, that is."

The clanging of swords started up again the moment both contestants disappeared again from the spectators' eyes. Each slash was sharper and swifter than the last, generating shock waves that tore into the pieces of the ruined stage. Naturally, Kelvin could not remain unhurt, being one of those in the heart of the storm. Wounds started appearing all over his body. Although shallow, they were many. On the other hand, the Beast King did not have a single cut on him. Kelvin's strikes *were* landing, but every last one of them merely bounced off, leaving nothing more than harmless sparks.

He's used his talismans to raise his Endurance level crazy high like he did with his swords. However...

While Kelvin's head whirled with multiple chains of thought, he started gaining the upper hand in the exchange. At first, it was so slight that even his companions failed to notice it, but that advantage compounded again and again until it became obvious.

SLASH!

Finally, a clean strike connected, and the talisman on Leonhart's right arm was shredded to nothing by Vortex Edge. As an aftereffect, countless slashes dug into the arm directly, wracking him with pain.

His swordsmanship level...has gone up?

The Sword Mastery skill did its job even when its owner was using multiple swords. Both the Beast King and Kelvin had the skill at Rank S, but the former's proficiency without the skill was supposed to be higher.

"I confess, I'm surprised by how many loopholes there are in the Beast King Festival's rules. That goes as much for your talismans as it does this."

"You're talking about...that glove of yours?"

The Skill Eater gauntlet currently on Kelvin's left arm held Rion's Rank S skill, Dual Wield. Normally, only Heroes who had come to this world through the good offices of Melfina as the Goddess of Reincarnation were allowed to possess the skill. As was evident from its name, this was a skill that activated only when the owner was wielding two swords at the same time. It provided support with power, technique, and all other aspects of fighting—on top of the effects of Sword Mastery. That was why Rion's class was Sword Saint, as her ability with the sword was so far beyond that of other practitioners it was as if she were a saint to them.

"Ngh!"

Now that they were boosted by Dual Wield, Kelvin's strikes proved enough to hurt even Leonhart's left arm, which was still protected by a talisman. The equilibrium of the fight had been broken. The Beast King lowered his head, breathing heavily. But just as it seemed he had reached his limit...

"You're such a meanie, Kel-nii. Why're you bullying me?"

"Wha—?!"

Leonhart looked back up, his appearance switching from Efil to Rion in a split second. The timing was perfect, and his performance as a weakened and frightened Rion was perfect. However, Kelvin was not one to be taken by surprise by such a low blow this far into the fight. He knew full well that his opponent was the Beast King, so he would have continued attacking without hesitation...if that opponent hadn't also been wearing a wedding dress.

"Aha ha! I love you so much, Kel-nii!"

Leonhart's Unique Skill, Metamorphosis, allowed him to change not only his appearance and the details of his visible Status but also the outfit he was wearing. Thanks to Parallel Processing, Kelvin only faltered for a fraction of a second. However, that was enough of an opening for the Beast King. He let go of his left sword and grabbed the

sister-doting brother's right wrist.

Crackkk!

Sharp pain shot through Kelvin's body. Although Leonhart was now in Rion's small form, his actual stats remained his own. He used his overwhelming Strength to crush Kelvin's bones, but Kelvin still refused to let go of his sword. If he did, Dual Wield would deactivate and he would be unable to push through using Rion's skill. His will was iron and his soul was aflame.

"Take...this!"

Through remote manipulation, Kelvin picked up one of the Obsidian Edges on the stage and sent it directly through Leonhart's unprotected right arm. Furthermore, he let go of the Obsidian Edge in his left hand in order to catch it using a reverse grip and stab it directly into Leonhart's flank. Both blades were clad in Vortex Edge, which ripped apart both talismans and the Beast King's insides. In fact, his right arm was so thin that this attack ended up severing it completely, sending it flying through the air before it hit the ground and rolled away.

"Aha! Aha ha ha! I just love you so much!"

Even while crushing Kelvin's wrist and being stabbed in the side, Leonhart brought his face close enough to Kelvin's to almost kiss him, hugging him close with a viselike grip. Still in Rion's appearance, he opened his cute lips, bared his canines...then tore out Kelvin's carotid artery.

"Ughhhh?!"

"Aha! It tastes terrible, just as I expected! But I! Love! You!"

While bathed in a shower of blood, the Beast King used his remaining left arm to continue hugging Kelvin close. Someone who didn't know better might have thought this was a beautiful hug between siblings, but the truth was that Leonhart was trying to squeeze out every last drop of blood in Kelvin's body. The white wedding dress that he was wearing was rapidly being dyed crimson.

Am I...out of time? How much longer until I lose consciousness from losing too much blood? And with us being so close, I can't just send Obsidian Edges at Leonhart. Oh, wait...

"Aha! I think...this is...my victory, right, Kel-nii?"

"You shouldn't...let down your guard...till the end..."

"Ehe he, you're...scaring me..."

Countless jet-black swords with Vortex Edge undone floated in the air, surrounding and pointing directly at the embracing two figures.

"You won't...get off unscathed...either, Kel-nii..."

"Ha ha...don't worry, I've...adjusted it so that...it hits you more...than me... And also..."

Kelvin peeled off the talisman on Leonhart's back.

“You sure...are thorough...”

“It’s...time.”

The jet-black swords fell as one, dealing out the fateful stroke of judgment that decided the outcome of the match.



“MEDIIIIICS!” Ronove’s voice reverberated throughout the coliseum. In the center, between the broken pieces of the stage, were Kelvin, who was busy healing himself, and the Beast King, who was pincushioned with Obsidian Edges. The blades had dispelled, leaving the Beast King lying on the ground covered in the red scraps of what used to be a wedding dress.

“Ah?! Ugh...”

“Oh, you’re awake?”

“*Huff, huff*... Physically, I’m still wounded all over, but mentally...I’m not quite sure how to feel after being healed by you...”

“Well, I only healed you enough to repay the favor of you allowing us to participate in the Beast King Festival. No more than that, so take care of your right arm by yourself.” Kelvin stood up, a sour look on his face.

“Still, you’re a pretty crafty one yourself. I honestly never expected you to have a spell prepared under the sole of your foot.”

“It’s only natural to prepare a countermeasure for getting out of a grapple. The Impact that I’d finished chanting before the match proved useful after all, didn’t it? There were plenty of other ways I could have used it too, with it being where it was. You sure you don’t want to ban all use of magic in these matches next year?”

“I’ll...think about it.”

Just before the cloud of Obsidian Edges had struck, Kelvin had activated the Impact spell prepared beneath the sole of his shoe to slip out of Leonhart’s grip. Consequently, the Beast King had ended up being stabbed by all the swords.

“Well done, seeing through all my schemes. The last time I was this soundly defeated...was last year, by Goldiana. Here, I’ll give you a reward. I’d actually thought this up for Kilto, but oh well.”

The Beast King, who was still in Rion’s appearance, struggled to raise his face, put a bright smile on it, then approached Kelvin.

“Thank you for getting revenge for me, Kel-nii. I-I’ll be waiting for your proposal!”

“Hah! You really don’t get it. Rion didn’t wish for revenge. I was just doing it because I wanted to. Also, Rion’s only fourteen. Wait until next year to do it again!”

There wasn’t a shred of hesitation in Kelvin’s eyes as he replied with a straight face.



The two contestants of the next match, Goldiana and Sera, were walking together down the passage leading to the stage.

“Good for Kelvin-chan, right? I’m glad for him.”

“I believed in his victory from the start! But I think Mel and Efil will insist on nursing him and won’t let him go for quite some time.”

Although these two were going to be opponents on stage, they were chatting as friends the way they normally did.

“By the way, did you not get a new pair of knuckle-dusters, Sera-chan?”

“Mm, well...after watching your match with Dahak, I realized that I’ll need to go full throttle from the very start when fighting you. But the equipment issued by the tournament just wouldn’t do. Wait, you’re bare-handed too!”

“My reasoning’s the same as yours. I normally fight bare-handed anyway, and with you being my opponent...”

The two stopped and looked at each other.

“Ha ha!”

“Heh heh!”

They both smiled for a brief moment, then resumed walking. Apparently, something that only they understood had occurred during that short period of time.

“But still, I’m quite surprised.”

“About what?”

“The rules allow for killing, right? I was pretty sure that Kelvin-chan would take the opportunity to kill Leo-chan.”

“Of course he wouldn’t. If he did, who else would he ask to help Rion train to overcome her weakness?”

“Uh, you guys plan on using the king of a country as a training partner?”

“At the very least, Kelvin means to. Also, even though it wouldn’t be considered a crime, it would make Rion sad if she learned Kelvin killed someone on her beha— Ah, we have to split up here.”

The passage split into two directions, leading to the separate entrances they were supposed to approach the stage from.

“All right. Goldiana, the next time we meet, we’ll be enemies! If you dare to go easy on me, I’ll sock you a good one!”

“My oh my, how scary! But I’m a woman living for love too! Losing is not an option!”

Sera and Goldiana softly knocked their fists together, then both struck off down their respective corridors.



“Thank you for your work again, stage-changing team!” Ronove called out to show her appreciation to the Gaunian soldiers who were heaving and sweating while swapping out the broken stage for a new one for the nth time that day.

“We’re exchanging them far more frequently than we’ve had to in previous years,” Yujil noted. “Ordering extras proved to be a great idea after all.”

“I completely agree. We still have a few more, so they should be able to last us for the rest of the tournament!”

There was a middle-aged man in the spectator stands who had fainted, foaming at the mouth, but Ronove pretended not to see him. His students were with him, so she figured they’d be enough to tend to him.

“Unfortunately, father’s loss in the fight just now means there are no more Gaunian participants in the tournament. However, it was a match worth watching indeed,” Jereol remarked.

“Speaking on behalf of all normal people, I only barely understood what was going on even when watching the replay footage!”

“That was actually a very respectable fight for our father. He didn’t even pull anything underhanded outside of the fight itself.”

“True. Compared to what he did during the throne succession battle, this is squeaky clean. Is there anyone who can actually match his heinousness and inhum—”

“I’m sorry to cut you two off, but the contestants for the next match have arrived!”

All eyes in the venue turned towards the two entrances, where two silhouettes slowly came into view, stopped, squatted down, then...

“Th-They jumped?!”

Both figures had leaped high into the air and landed on the stage with earsplitting crashes. It was a first even for Caesar to have one of his stages damaged before the match itself.

“What a relief Caesar-shi already fainted! No, more importantly, what is with Sera-sama’s and Goldiana-sama’s appearances?!”

The two contestants had shown up in vivid crimson and dazzling pink, stealing the eyes of everyone present with conspicuous colors on full display.

“So, that’s your trump card? The one you used at the end of your match with Dahak? Now I’m excited!”

Sera had taken Clip of Camouflage off, letting her normally tied-up hair flow freely down her back, and was already clad in full-body Blood Scrimmage. Her hands had been transformed into vicious-looking claws that would not fit into any conventional weapons made for bare knuckles. Her demon wings, tail, and horns were visible in bloodred coloring, and she was emanating a baleful aura, but the

spectators assumed these were all effects from a spell. Lastly, several small bloodred spheres were floating along behind her.

“You’re just as sexy as I am, Sera-chan. I love your look!”

On the other side of the stage stood Goldiana, who was enveloped in Rose Ishtar from head to toe. The fighting spirit emanating from her bursting muscles was visible as an entrancing aura the color of peaches that made her large build look even bigger. This aura was particularly thick around her fists and eyes, with the traces coming from the eyes floating upwards to make it seem like she had two rigid horns protruding from her head. The reason for her alias as “Peach Ogre” was now on full display.

“I feel like I’m looking at a demon and an ogre facing off against each other,” Jereol murmured.

“How, what, uh, huh?!” Ronove was so flustered that she struggled to form a complete sentence. “Are they doing all that with spells?”

“At the very least, I know that Goldiana-dono is not. What you are seeing is an extension of normal martial arts, likely the same school of technique employed by Grostina-dono. Sera-dono’s does appear to be made with magic, but it seems extremely lifelike. Honestly, I cannot say for sure.”

“I-I see... Huh? Why are both of them looking our way?” Ronove noticed that both contestants were staring at the commentator’s box.

“Hey, are you going to announce the start of the match soon? I really want to get started!”

“Same here. Maintaining this look isn’t exactly good for my skin, so I’d like to start as soon as possible!”

“Oh, right. I’m sorry! Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the second semifinal match! Ready... FIGHT!”

“YAH!”

“RAH!”

Right off the bat, each contestant threw a punch at the other’s right cheek. Sera found her punch blocked by Goldiana’s aura, unable to push through no matter how much she strained, while Goldiana found *her* punch dodged outright.

So tough! Sera thought. *I can’t get my blood on her this way!*

So fast! Goldiana thought. *It’s going to be difficult even landing attacks on her!*

A second round of punches was promptly unleashed, followed by a third, a fourth—in the blink of an eye, the two contestants were embroiled in a full-blown exchange. The scene of the Sera-Bahl fight was reproduced, with shock waves slamming into their surroundings again and again, shaking the entire venue and filling the air with an unending chain of explosions.



BANG!

Two kicks crossed each other, splitting the air. A grimace flashed across Sera's face as a crack appeared in Blood Scrimmage on her foot. "Ugh!"

Sera's blood had to actually make contact with someone's bare skin in order to take effect, and Rose Ishtar was proving to be very good at preventing that. In power, too, Sera was inferior to Goldiana, which gave her very little hope of winning in a frontal assault. She was the one who would take more damage in direct exchanges of attacks like the kick just now. However, she of course had other cards up her sleeve.

"Blood Ball!"

In response to Sera's call, one of the spheres floating next to her took on the form of a huge spear, seemingly ignoring the law of conservation of mass. The spear then shot towards Goldiana and drilled into her aura.

It's...actually coming through?!

Each Blood Ball was basically a compressed sphere of Sera's blood that she could freely control through Bloodbending. Thanks to her higher Agility, she managed to land the attack in the split second the two of them were held in place through the leg lock. Through focusing all of its force into one tiny point, the blood spear had managed to penetrate Goldiana's pink aura, boring through to reach her bare skin.

"Hmph!"

Right before the spear made contact, however, it suddenly exploded.

"What...is that?"

The way in which the tightly solidified blood spear had been reduced to a mere puddle had been so unbelievable that even Sera, who had promptly backed off after the kick, inadvertently gave voice to the bewilderment she felt.

"This is the ability of Rose Ishtar. It enables me to freely control all this loooooove that's overflowing from my body. Just like...this!"

Goldiana gathered her pink aura to her chest, creating a stout and sturdy shield—no, stout and sturdy muscles. The pink energy squeezed together to form something beyond a bodybuilder's body to reach a state that could only be described as "an aggregation of muscles." It was these glistening, all-enveloping pecs of love that had crushed the spear and repelled the blood.

"Okay, even I think this looks kinda gross," Ronove blurted out. The muscles made from the pink aura seemed so strangely realistic that most spectators had also inadvertently turned away.

"That said, I might have been in trouble if not for Sixth Sense. I

almost let your blood touch me.”

“Oh! You remember how my power works!”

“Of course I do! A good woman remembers everyone else first by their good...points!”

Even though she was quite a distance away, Goldiana swung her arm in a hook punch.

That attack...will reach me!

The moment Goldiana threw her punch, her aura rushed to gather around her right fist, forming a giant hand that shot forward as if it were rubber. It looked like her arm was extending, but Sera’s intuition helped her understand what was really going on.

KA-BOOOOOOOOM!

This attack was likely the most simplistic and yet the most destructive that had been seen so far.

That was close! Is her Strength higher than even Zel’s?!

Sera hovered in the air, flapping her wings. The entire ground within the barrier, including where she had been standing mere moments ago, had been pulverized. The stage had been reduced to rubble, and there was a crater in the ground itself. Sera noticed Peach Ogre staring directly at her.

“Queen Bee Stylet!”

Goldiana stabbed in Sera’s direction multiple times with all her fingers from an open palm. Every single one of her invisible air bullets packed enough destructive force to not only open a hole in Sera’s body but blow off a body part, Blood Scrimmage and all, from a mere brush. The demon weaved through them while sending instructions to the remains of what used to be her blood spear.

“Collapse.”

The blood sneakily seeped into the stage fragment that Goldiana was standing on. At Sera’s command, the stage turned into sand and gave way.

“Oh my! That sure was dangerous.”

However, Goldiana leaped up with a soft *whoosh* that seemed at odds with her build, retreating to a safe distance in the nick of time.

About that “sixth sense” she mentioned, it seems to be less of a detection skill and more like precognition. But..

The moment she gave her order to the Blood Ball, Sera had also begun rushing towards Goldiana with Flight at full output. It did not matter that Goldiana could predict attacks if she could not evade them. The flying kick Sera unleashed carried all the acceleration she had generated with her superior Agility stat and caught Goldiana right in the throat, sending her large form crashing into a mountain of rubble. The feel of the blow informed Sera that, although she had given it her all, it had still proved insufficient for penetrating Rose

Ishtar.

“Then again, if she could go down from something of this degree, I wouldn’t be having so much trouble.”

“I know, right?”

Sera easily slipped out of the way as a giant hand emerged from the dust cloud and smashed downwards, creating a huge hand-shaped indentation in the ground. The stage-changing team who had to fix this afterwards were so disheartened that their faces had turned haggard.

“Mm? That’s strange... I’ve been feeling kinda out of sorts this fight...” Goldiana muttered.

“Were you unable to sleep properly last night because you were too excited? Ha ha ha, you’re like a child!”

Sera herself had actually been unable to sleep the previous night, and Kelvin had had to forcibly put her to sleep with magic.

The debuff spells that I cast on her arms and legs before the match should have taken effect, but...

When the two had bumped fists right before splitting up to head onto the stage, Sera had cast two Rank C Black Magic spells—Sword Break, which lowered Strength; and Armor Corrosion, which lowered Endurance—on Goldiana, twice each. Sera was absolutely speechless in the face of the destructive and defensive capabilities that her friend was displaying in spite of what she had done.

This is what she can do with four active debuffs? Looks like I really have to pull out all the stops.

Sera lifted a finger, causing the Blood Ball that had been hidden within a pile of sand to start chasing Goldiana, reducing everything it touched to more sand. Naturally, Goldiana ran away from it, but she could not figure out what Sera’s intention was. The truth was that the demon was merely trying to buy time. She used that time to make further preparations.

“Oh? Is that the item you brought to the fight, Sera-chan?”

“Yep, it’s a special order made by Mel! Just the thing for picnics!”

Even from far away, Goldiana’s eyes could make out Sera plucking a cylindrical water bottle from her cleavage. Just as Sera had said, it was the perfect size for a child like Ruka or Shutola to bring along to a picnic.

“Is it...filled with a strange liquid like Grostina’s perfume bottles?”

“Nope. This is just plain old water. There’s just a *lot* of it.”

Right after answering, Sera threw the bottle at the ground. She hadn’t been entirely forthcoming—the water inside the bottle actually contained a little bit of her blood. Before the match, she had told the blood, “Don’t let the bottle break,” as the bottle was only as strong as a normal bottle. Now, however, she overwrote the order. *Break the*

bottle right now.

“When everything’s said and done, I think Mel and I really have the best compatibility in fights. With the stuff she makes, I can do...this.”

The instant the bottle hit the ground, it cracked open and water burst out. In the blink of an eye, the entire ground within the barrier was flooded with water. To finish off, Sera dropped one Blood Ball into the water, like adding a cube of sugar into a cup of coffee. The previously clear liquid immediately took on a slightly reddish tinge.

“I see, I see. But Sera-chan, this isn’t enough to get through Rose Ishtar and touch me directly.”

“If this were all it did, then yes, you’d be right. But I can now control all this water!”

“Hm?”

The red water at Goldiana’s feet receded as the massive amount of liquid rushed towards the source of its power: Sera. It climbed up her legs and took on a certain form.

“Oh...oh my. I do think your powers give you a little too much freedom, hon.”

Now Sera had a giant tail of water attached to the demon tail that had become visible due to Blood Scrimmage. She flicked it back and forth a few times as if testing how it felt. It was so long that there was no way she would be able to use it properly if she wasn’t flying, and there were blades made from blood embedded along its length. Conceptually, it was similar to the whip that Grostina had used during her match, but the scale was on an entirely different level.

“You’re hardly one to talk, Goldiana. And since this is a rare chance to have a full-on battle with a close friend, I’ve got to put in the effort!”

The water tail rushed out in a horizontal attack, mowing down everything in its path. It swallowed every last piece of rubble in its way, clearing away the shattered remains of the stage. Everything that entered the tail came under Blood Dominion’s control, eagerly awaiting its new master’s order to attack. The surprise of seeing the grounds so perfectly clean ended up being a nice surprise for the stage-changing team, bringing a smile to all their faces. Their opinion of Sera shot through the roof even without it being intentional on her part. In the end, it was just another instance of her ridiculously high Luck stat at work.

The cost of this was incredibly steep, however, as it ended up making her tail even more dreadful and formidable.

“How does Bloody Reaper’s Tail sound? I just came up with the idea for this move on the spot, but it turned out really well! Go me!”

While Sera was praising herself, Goldiana landed after having

leaped up to evade the tail attack.

“So, you’re going off the cuff? I really do admire that daringness of yours, Sera-chan.”

“Well, duh! After all, I get to practice on your special— Wait, what are you making me say?!”

Sera’s face changed from a self-assured smirk to being red like a beet in a split second, her Bloody Reaper’s Tail flailing up, down, and every which way with loud bangs. It was not clear whether the tail was truly connected to her emotions, but there was no doubting that she was extremely flustered.

Oh my, she’s just so intensely cute! Goldiana was considerate enough to keep that scream inside her heart, though. Soon, the tail stopped thrashing about, and Sera, having regained her composure, cleared her throat.

“I-In any case, our fight so far has given me a good idea for how to get through to you. Are you ready, Goldiana?”

“Come on and try it on me! A good woman makes her point with actions, not words.”

“You don’t need to tell me twice!”

The blades of blood in the tail gathered at the tip, then the whole thing charged straight at Goldiana.

What a large-scale way to hide her embarrassment!

Goldiana’s backfist smashed against the approaching tail tip, scattering more than half of the red liquid everywhere. Even so, the Bloody Reaper’s Tail did not stop. The Blood Ball that it had surreptitiously incorporated while making a sweep of the ground earlier created more blades at the cross section where the rest of the tail had been blown off. Then the tail was back in business and on the attack once more.

Hmm, grappling with that would be a bad idea. I may be sturdy, but it’s dangerous to remain in close proximity with this Bloody Reaper’s Tail. After all, it is liquid without a defined form. Even though I’ve been doing a good job protecting myself from Blood Dominion so far, if I get caught by the water, I would only be able to muster half my usual strength. Don’t think I didn’t notice the bit I blasted away secretly creeping back to rejoin the tail! In other words...rather than attacking the tail, I should go for Sera-chan directly!

Just as Goldiana looked towards the base of the tail, where Sera should have been, she found her field of vision entirely filled by an approaching wall of water. What’s more...

Fwoom!

Multiple pieces of the stage—which was made of very hard material—that had been on standby inside the tail all this time now shot out like cannonballs in quick succession. On a whim, Sera had

thought of doing her own version of Bahl's cube-throwing move and actually succeeded in her attempt.

Goldiana kept on firing Queen Bee Stylets to shoot down the cannon bombardment, but the restored tail was getting closer by the moment.

"Pink Doki Doki Smash!"

Goldiana gathered her entire aura to her right arm and threw the ultimate attack that had previously pulverized the stage. It collided with the tip of the water tail and sent a destructive force down its length that caused it to collapse with sheets of spray that seemed to claw at the sky.

"Hah! I got you...to concentrate all your power!"

"Wha—?!"

Sera, who was supposed to be at the other end of the tail, was now standing on the exact opposite side—right behind Goldiana's back.

So the reason Sera-chan made the water look like a tail is to make me think she'd be on the other end! It was a bluff!

Goldiana had hit the nail on the head. Sera had figured out that the best way to deal with Sixth Sense was to overwhelm Goldiana with information. To that end, after detaching herself from the tail, she had used it to launch a bombardment and made it go on a rampage in order to draw Goldiana's attention, just waiting for the moment all of Rose Ishtar was gathered for one big attack.

Sera had then rushed over as fast as she could behind the tail, using it as cover. This explained why, at that very moment, razor-sharp claws were digging into Goldiana's back where the aura was thin.

"Hng!"

"Your aura might be very resistant to blunt damage, but it's not all that effective against sharp attacks, is it? And I just happen to have really sharp claws in Blood Scrimmage form!"

The ends of Sera's claws dug deeper and deeper into Goldiana's aura until they finally punctured her bare skin. In other words, the conditions for activating Blood Dominion had been met.

"Dispel that aura!"

Immediately, Rose Ishtar disappeared completely. Sera had successfully stripped Goldiana of her protective aura. However, there was no time to celebrate yet. Sera needed to use more blood in order to give a larger quantity of and more complicated orders through Blood Dominion, and she had determined that blocking the aura was the most she could do with a mere touch. So she did not try to order Goldiana to stop moving.

"Ha ha, it makes me happy that you've been looking so closely at

me! But..."

The muscles around the area Sera's claws were digging into suddenly bulged up.

Huh?! I'm stuck!

No matter how hard Sera pushed or pulled, her claws did not budge. She could no longer move them. Goldiana's fully clenched back muscles had completely locked her blades in place.

Sera could only give one command with the amount of contact she currently had. If she changed her order to "Don't move," then Goldiana's pink aura would return to smack her away. She was stuck between two hard places—both in a physical and strategic sense.

"I've caught you now, Sera-chan!"

"Gah!"

Blood spurted out of Sera's mouth as Goldiana's right elbow slammed into her abdomen. The attack was so devastating that it even shattered Blood Scrimmage.

"You did, and now...you've got my blood on you."

"I...didn't really have a choice, did I?"

The elbow that had just slammed into Sera had fallen under her control. Goldiana felt herself losing all feeling in her right arm from the elbow down at the exact same moment she used her left hand to parry Sera's thrust. Or rather, she did not parry it so much as destroy it. Sera had swung her one free claw at Goldiana's head, but Goldiana had instantly grabbed the claw and crushed it. This caused her to lose control and feeling in her left hand, so she used that elbow to unleash another elbow jab. With every attack she made, she lost control of additional parts of her body.

"Huff...huff..."

The impact from the second elbow jab had snapped the claw lodged in Goldiana's back. The tips were still stuck inside, so the effect from their contact remained. Sera had taken a huge amount of damage, but the silver lining was that she was now free.

"You seem like a candle flickering in the wind, Sera-chan. But I suppose this is nothing for you and your regenerative powers, right?"

"What hurts, ugh...still hurts."

Rose Ishtar was blocked, and both of Goldiana's arms were beyond her control. On the other hand, Blood Scrimmage had been shattered in multiple places and was on the verge of crumbling entirely. It was clear which of the two was more hurt. And yet, the match was practically over.

"Goldi...ana...when you...drink coffee...how many sugars...do you...put in?"

"Well...three sounds good. I like it black too, but I'm in the mood for three. When I see a dream slipping through my fingers...when I

feel heartbroken...I end up wanting to drink something sweet.”

“I see...”

The water from the collapsed Bloody Reaper’s Tail washed over the two figures, once again flooding the entirety of the grounds within the barrier. Sera dropped a third Blood Ball—the last one—into the water and activated her skill. Now that she had lost the protection from her aura, Goldiana had lost control of her legs to the water, which had grown even thicker with blood than before.

As the water slowly crawled up her body, she watched Sera, who was all beaten up and still had blood dribbling down her lips, pulling a fist back. In spite of how she looked, however, Sera’s victory was imminent. All she had to do was touch Goldiana’s forehead with her own blood or simply wait for the crawling water to do the work.

“I want to at least end this with my own words,” Goldiana said. With tears streaming down her face, she declared, “I’ve lost.”

Chapter 3: Profession of Love

“Extra! Extra! The final brackets for the Beast King Festival have been deciiided!”

The streets of the capital city were flooded with the news immediately after the two matches of the semifinals were over. The newspaper companies printed extras as quickly as they could and spread them everywhere, all of which were snapped up by the beastkin in no time at all. Regardless of age or gender, every last resident of the city was desperate to find out the results of the tournament. And of course, they invariably gasped with surprise at the unexpected matchup in the final.

“I didn’t expect the final to be tomorrow. I was definitely under the impression they’d finish the whole tournament today,” Kelvin murmured.

He was currently taking a detour with his companions in order to avoid the crowds on the large avenues. He had the hood of Astarte’s Embrace pulled all the way down, fully aware that it would cause a huge commotion if he, the very person the papers were talking about, was spotted. Sera, Gerard, Alex, and Dahak all had far too distinctive appearances, so they were within Kelvin’s magic pool for the moment. So was Melfina, who was currently sleeping blissfully after having grown sleepy from a full stomach. Efil’s and Rion’s looks were so attractive that they turned heads wherever they went, but they were able to mask their presence using Covert Action. That only left Shutola, who was getting a piggyback ride from Kelvin, with the maids and Ange bringing up the rear. Of course, this group was still rather eye-catching, but thankfully, the beastkin were too preoccupied with the news.

“They host the finals alongside the Naming Ceremony every year,” Ange replied. “And of course, spectators have to buy another ticket to watch tomorrow.”

Kelvin sighed and smiled wryly. “That Beast King sure knows how to do business. I mean, I’m sure the seats will be completely filled again, so I can’t exactly fault him, I guess.”

Gaun Mixed Fighting Arena was indeed quite large, but understandably, it could not seat the population of the entire country. Getting a ticket was probably a feat and a half, and many people would have to pull an all-nighter lining up.

“Ughhh...*sniff*...”

Kelvin heard a young girl’s muffled sob coming from his back. It had come from Shutola. Her body was quivering slightly, and she had her face buried in his black robe.

“C’mon, cheer up, Shutola. Your advice really did help us out a whole lot.”

“B-But...in the end, I d-didn’t get anything a-at all...”



Shutola had been in this state ever since the semifinals ended. She had renewed her resolve to be of help at the start of their matches but had found herself unable to keep up with the extraordinary fights. Kelvin and Gerard had stayed next to her to offer commentary, but hearing something being described and seeing it in person were very different experiences. There wasn't much to say, as it was simply a matter of Shutola's level and stats not being high enough, but the fact of the matter was that the situation had pained her greatly.

"Shutola-sama, please do not be sad. Being unable to follow along in the semifinals is normal."

"But Rosalia, you and Huba could, right?"

"Rosalia is one thing, but I only very, veeeeery barely managed to follow along! There'd be zero chance of me keeping up if I had to fight on that level! It'd be an instant KO!"

"Sniff..."

Despite her personal maids' attempts at consolation, Shutola's head was still bowed.

Kelvin whispered in Rosalia's ear. "Say, it's only her memories that she lost and not her levels, right? Isn't her level way too low for being general of the Black Ops? Especially compared to Azgrad's. She hasn't used any of her Skill Points either, it seems."

Through Analyze Eye, Kelvin could see that Shutola's level was fourteen, and this was something he had always thought strange. What's more, although she had a rather impressive number of Skill Points, she had only dipped into them for the bare minimum of skills. Like Azgrad, she had plenty of talent. However, she was not taking advantage of it.

Rosalia replied in an equally soft voice, "Originally, the position of general was something completely unrelated to Shutola-sama as the princess of the country. Aside from going on an exchange to an academy on the Western Continent, she had almost never left the castle, much less experienced direct battle with monsters before. However, she is a genius who never forgets anything she sees. She would likely have racked up various achievements if left alone, but the previous king of Trycen went out of his way to install her as general of the Black Ops to give her a place to fully exercise her abilities. As for her skills, I'm afraid you'd have to ask her yourself."

"She never forgets anything she sees? Really?"

Kelvin remembered hearing somewhere that there were indeed such people. *That makes it all the more ironic that she's now missing memories after what the Demon Lord did to her.*

"Just checking, it's not that Shutola is forbidden to raise her level, right?"

“It is not. However, as I said earlier, she is the precious princess of our country. I cannot endorse exposing her to unnecessary danger, particularly in light of her current mental state.”

“Uh...isn't Azgrad precious too? He's the crown prince, right?”

“He's different. Just like you, Master, he would not listen anyway. He's a battle junkie, after all.”

“Uh...”

Kelvin wasn't sure whether to sympathize with Azgrad for the way he was treated or be glad for him for having the freedom to live the way he wanted. Kelvin himself got bad-mouthed too, in an indirect way, but as there was no way to deny his being a battle junkie, he had decided to embrace a “So what?” attitude about it.

That aside, Kelvin had the Experience Sharing skill. As a result, Shutola's level could be raised without exposing her to any danger. The group could simply power-level her just like they'd done for Ellie and Ruka. Of course, if she wished to learn how to fight, they would be more than happy to teach her.

“Shutola,” Kelvin said, returning to his normal voice.

“Mm?”

“If you want, we can train you. I guarantee we can get you to a level where you can keep up with a match like that on your own.”

“You...will? Really...?”

“That's right. Of course, that's only if you want us to—”

“Yes, please! I want to be able to do many, many more things! And then! Then I want to help you and Rion-chan so much more!”

“R-Right... Well, after the Beast King Festival's over, let's go find a convenient dungeon somewhere.”

Shutola lifted her head and replied with such enthusiasm that it slightly took Kelvin aback. *Looks like our little princess is a bundle of ambition*, he thought wryly before noticing the hard stares he was getting from Rosalia and Huba. Eventually, he managed to convince them that there was no danger involved without bringing up Experience Sharing, thanks in no small part to Rion's and Efil's support. This was how the second round of “Let's go all out in a dungeon!” was planned.

“Oh, looks like you're all pumped up, Shutola-sama!” Ange commented. “As an older sister, I've got to gather my courage too! Efil-chan, I'll do my best!”

“Huh? Uh...um, yes, please! Go for it!”

“All right! I got Efil-chan's go-ahead!”

Efil wasn't entirely sure what Ange meant by her declaration but expressed her support nonetheless. Here was another pair that wasn't exactly on the same page.



Afterwards, I Summoned Sera and the others, and we headed back to our inn after saying farewell to Ange. The high-class establishment we were staying at had a hot spring that, while not quite equal to our bath back home, was still quite lavish. Sera declared she wanted to go for a soak and immediately took off, bringing Ruka, Rion, and the now-cheerful Shutola along. Worried about leaving them unsupervised, Efil also headed over with the maids.

::Heh heh heh, I'm still only eighty percent full....::

The person blissfully sleep-talking within my magic pool was, of course, Melfina. There was no sign of her waking up any time soon. Judging by the limp forms of the chefs at the coliseum, she had truly eaten and drunk to her heart's content. It was little wonder she was in such a good mood.

"Phew. This sure was a tiring day."

I sat down on one of the sofas at the inn and leaned back with my arms spread wide. I'd had *three* bouts of fun today facing off against Jereol, Grostina, and Leonhart, getting poisoned and losing a ton of blood. It was a truly enjoyable time. I was extremely satisfied.

"So, I'm fighting Sera in the final match tomorrow, huh? She beats me almost every time in our close-quarters combat practice matches. I guess how much I can prepare before the fight will be key."

While I was in the middle of my thoughts, I noticed one of the inn's staff members hurriedly approaching me.

"Kelvin-sama, I was looking for you. These letters were left for you at reception."

"What letters?"

The woman handed me two envelopes. One had a cute, girly design, and the other was a fancy design that I recognized—it looked exactly like the one I'd received from the Beast King for my Rank S promotion exam. A sense of foreboding rose through my chest.

"I will be taking my leave now."

The beastkin lady swiftly made her exit.

"Hmm, and the other letter is from...Ange?"

The light-pink stationery told me that there was something she wanted to tell me, asking me to go to the coliseum through the back entrance at ten o'clock tonight. *What's she going to all this trouble for?*

"As for *this* one... Seriously, what should I do with it?"

The letter from Leonhart seemed to reek of being a trap, but I had no choice but to open it. Inside, it said there was something he wanted to tell me, asking me to visit the castle at ten o'clock.

"Huh?! I'm double-booked?!"



Late at night, the Gaun Mixed Fighting Arena was so quiet it was as if the tumult of the Beast King Festival had been a passing dream. Perhaps the place where the tickets for tomorrow were being sold was somewhere else, or maybe even the beastkin had to go rest after such a full day. Either way, I—deciding to prioritize Ange's letter—found myself there alone.

I mean, I basically had to choose between Ange and Leonhart. I'm not someone who would willingly step on a land mine that I can see from a mile off. I'll just apologize to Leonhart tomorrow. I'll say I was already asleep. Even Efil and the rest told me to come here.

"Master, I believe you really should go see Ange."

"There's no need to give it another thought, Kelvin! No matter how it ends, closure is important!"

"I'd respect whatever your answer is, Kel-nii. Good luck!"

"*Arf, arf!*" (Good luck!)

That atmosphere had truly left me no choice but to go to meet her. Even Dahak, who had been out searching for Prettia as usual, and Gerard, who had been playing with his grandchildren, had said the same.

"Brother, you're seriously amazing! Your charisma never ceases to impress me!"

"Mm, I knew that my eyes did not deceive me! My king, I saw this coming from the very start!"

And so on and so forth. I had no idea what my companions were talking about, but I figured it didn't matter much. *Um, the back entrance... Back entrance... Ah, there it is. Wow, there really isn't anyone around at all. How could they not station guards here? Isn't that a bit careless?*

I walked through the contestant entrance that I had passed through multiple times that day, coming out onto the new stage that had been brought in after Sera and Prettia's match. Moonlight fell gently, illuminating a figure on the stage. It was Ange, wearing the same outfit from the time I went on a date with her and Efil.

"K-Kelvin! Y-You really came for me!"

She's actually stuttering. Ange-san, you're stuttering.

"Well, you did send me a letter. What's this all about? We saw each other just a little while ago, didn't we?"

"Uh, th-th-there's something that I r-r-really want to tell you..."

She's getting even more flustered, and her stuttering is getting even worse.

"Hey, hey, hey, calm down. You can take your time; I'm not going anywhere. Take a deep breath."

"O-Okay. Hee, hee, phew..."

Uh, that's a breathing exercise from the Lamaze method, right? She

sure knows all the clichés... Oh well, I guess I'll just patiently wait for her to calm down.

I guided Ange to take a seat at the edge of the stage, then sat next to her myself.

"Ughh...I'm sorry, it wasn't supposed to go like this."

"Hey, it's fine. I'm not bothered."

"Mm, I'm okay now. I'm calm." After a while, she turned to me, resolve in her eyes. "Kelvin, all this time, I—"

"What's this? A secret nighttime date?" A young girl's voice cut Ange off.

"Huh?" I turned around and found Bahl, the red-haired girl with a small build, standing in the middle of the stage with no emotion on her face. Both her hands were on her waist, and her long hair was fluttering in the night breeze. The most eye-catching part was the purple greaves she was wearing on both legs. They sparkled so radiantly it was as if they had taken in the moon and all the stars in the sky. Their characteristic appearance seemed all the more pronounced in the dark of night.

"Not exactly what I'd call it," I returned. "How about you, though? What're you here for? Not grabbing a seat for tomorrow's match, right?"

I immediately stood up and stepped forward to cover Ange with my body. I had no idea why, but I could see that Bahl was wearing very high-ranked equipment. I did not remember doing anything to incur her enmity, but I would not be surprised if there was a situation related to Sera's background. I naturally raised my guard.

"Kelvin?"

"Ange, stay close to me."

"O-Okay..." Ange grabbed the back of my robe.

Fortunately, I had changed into my usual outfit. However, Ange's presence was indeed going to be a handicap if a fight broke out.

"Who, me?" Bahl pointed at me. "I'm here to see you, Kelvin."

"Me? Not Sera?" *She's asking for me by name? Seriously, what'd I do?*

"That's right, you. You see, I belong to a certain organization. And I'm here today to scout you for it."

"You want *me*?"

"That's right. I watched your fights today. You're still a bit rough around the edges, but I've determined that you're strong enough. You're worthy of filling the lowest seat among our numbers. You still have a lot of room to grow, though. And you can also make your party members much stronger."

Bahl raked her hair back. Even though her chest was quite modest, she still seemed strangely sensual for some reason.

“Well, I’m honored. Tell me more about your organization. What do you do? What is your goal?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Uh, what? Do you know how scouting works? What kind of idiot would just say yes without knowing what he’s getting into?”

“We have one condition if you are to join us.”

“You’re ignoring me?”

Bahl kept on talking, not caring about my protest in the slightest. “Namely, you must cancel your Contract with Melfina. If you do so, we will let you and your companions live.”

My eyes widened slightly. *Why does she know about Melfina’s existence? Not only that, she even knows that we’re Contracted. Actually, no, the answer’s pretty obvious. I talked about this with Melfina once before, didn’t I?*

“Is the goal of your organization something along the lines of resurrecting Elearis?”

“Tch.”

Ah, she looked away while clicking her tongue. She might be worse at lying than her appearance suggests.

“I see. Would there happen to be a guy named Jildora in your group? Scratch that. I’m sure there is.”

“Further conversation is unnecessary. Choose.” Bahl crossed her arms and closed her eyes.

She didn’t deny what I said, which probably means “yes,” right? So the big bad really is the previous Goddess of Reincarnation. Well, I don’t think I’ll be able to get much more information out of her.

“I refuse. I have no reason to join such a shady-sounding organization.”

“I see. So be it.”

Bahl tapped a foot on the stage, raising a soft metallic *ting*. Just as I braced myself in preparation for her assault, I felt myself being pulled backwards, with Ange’s face filling my field of view. She wore a complicated expression that looked sad and delighted at the same time.

“It’s a pity, Kelvin. But on the other hand, now your head’s mine.”

I felt a hot sensation flash through my neck. Then my vision turned round and round, first through the air, then...on the ground? In any case, the spinning soon stopped, and I realized I could not move my body. Rather, I could not feel anything except a deep, deep cold. *What is...*

You have died. Your Blessing of the Goddess of Reincarnation will now activate. You will be restored to your last condition before death. Remaining cooldown: 720:00:00

A screen that I did not recognize was in front of my eyes. Thanks to Parallel Processing, my brain instantaneously understood what had just happened to me.

“Huh? I’m pretty sure I chopped off his head.”

“Probably a blessing. Just do it again.”

I watched Ange speak to Bahl like they were close acquaintances. She was holding gleaming daggers in both hands. *That’s right. I just got beheaded by Ange, who I thought I was protecting.*

“Gosh! That’s not right, Kelvin-kun! Everyone only gets to live once! You shouldn’t go against the natural order of things in this world!”

Bahl sighed. “That line holds no water at all coming from a reincarnated person.”

“You’re the same as me!” Ange retorted.

I hadn’t the faintest idea where she had pulled it out from or when she had gotten changed, but Ange was now wearing a black coat with a hood that had cat ears sewn on. I backed up until I was standing roughly halfway between both girls.

“Ange, are you... Is that really you?” I asked.

“You wound me, Kelvin. Of course I’m me! It’s true that I’ve been Disguising my Status, but I’m every bit the Ange you know.”

“You done, Ange? Let’s get this—”

“No, no, give me a few more moments! There’s something I really want to say!”

“Tch. Hurry it up.”

Ange turned to me, looking like she wanted to pick up from where Bahl interrupted. “I missed my chance before, so I’ll say it now. Kelvin, I loved you. I don’t know if it was love at first sight, but I know that I came to love you. You see my coat? I made this to copy you, actually. Now we match! Then I sewed these cat ears on myself, hoping to be even a little bit cuter. What do you think? Are they cute? No, it’s okay, you don’t have to say anything. I know you’re strong, you’re kind, you don’t resort to violence, and you have the cutest smile. And that’s why...if you won’t join us, then at the very least, I want your head with that smile on it!”

Ange got all her words out with her usual smile.



Bahl sighed. "I'm Condemner of the Sixth Seat. If you want to curse someone for this, curse Melfina."

"And I'm Assassin of the Eig— Nah, there's no need for that. Just call me Ange like you always do, Kelvin!"

Killing intent exploded from both girls. It was so thick and ominous that I almost thought I could visually see it. A flock of wild birds burst into flight in the distance, almost as if they had sensed the advent of some terrible catastrophe.

Efil, Rion, Sera, can you guys hear me? It's an emergency.

I tried to call out through the Network, but no reply was forthcoming. I noticed a purple barrier quite different from the one erected during the matches now surrounding the stage area, which likely served to isolate me. Even Summoning could not be used within; I tried, to no avail. In other words, these two had gone to the trouble of preparing something similar to the barrier that had gone up at Trycen Castle.

All I can do is hope someone will notice how I dropped off the Network. The only ones currently in my magic pool are Boga and Mdofarak. Then inside my robe is—

::This is an emergency indeed. Above all, the sin of killing you is something that I cannot forgive, even if it was Ange who did so::

You're awake, Melfi— Oh, right! You were sleeping inside me this whole time!

A sleepy Melfina was, on a bad day, as much of a threat to my life as a drunk Sera. This time, me being too lazy and tired to wake her up earlier had ended up working in my favor. Since she was here inside the barrier with me, I could Summon her without a problem.

::You seem pretty calm, honey::

What do you mean? I may get excited in battle, but I always keep a cool head.

::No, I meant, aren't you shocked about being betrayed by Ange, who you thought was a friend?::

Betrayed? Well, I'm shocked, sure. I did just get killed by someone I trusted. There's no way I'm not shocked. But there's a bigger part of me that gets it now. I'm not sure why, but everyone—including Sera and Rion, who were close with her, even Gerard—told me that she had feelings for me. And I have feelings for her...as a friend. But everyone's talking about the other kind of feeling, right? The kind that someone has for a special someone. That was something that I couldn't quite parse before.

I looked at the characteristic smile on Ange's face. There were multiple times she had managed to quietly sneak up behind me with that very smile on her face. Each time, I was surprised and shuddered a little at how she had gotten the jump on me with her stats. It excited

me to think of how much she could do, how much stronger she could get if she actually raised her level. All of which was moot now, of course, as she had apparently been fudging the numbers.

I...see. I get it now.

::What do you mean, honey?::

Ange's feelings for me had been filled with so much madness that she wanted my head. Conversely, my feelings for her had included a longing to fight with a completed version of her. This was why I always felt that putting the common term of "love" to our relationship didn't feel quite right. What we had between us was something very similar but fundamentally different. That said, in a way...

Maybe I really have been in love with Ange all this time.

::What're you saying, honey?!::

The thought quickened my heartbeat and brought a grin to my face.

::That's the best smile you've given in a while, and I absolutely love that about you, but I cannot overlook what you just said! How can you so blatantly declare your intention of cheating straight to your wife's face?! I protest! I... I really do!::

Ange and I had been fated to be opponents from the start, two people who meant the world to each other. This way of putting it felt much more fitting. My heart continued beating faster the longer I looked at her face. This was something that I absolutely had to do, right here, right now.

::Ugh, I forgot you're an absolute madman when it comes to battle::

I keep telling you not to read my mind. But never mind, I guess that means you're up to speed. Take care of Bahl for me. I have to answer Ange's feelings.

::I also don't like how you worded that, but because I am lenient and magnanimous, I will do as you asked. Since I'm your legal wife!::

Right after finishing my high-speed conversation with Melfina, I turned my back on Bahl to face Ange.

"Isn't it an honor for a battle junkie like yourself to die in a place like th—" Bahl cut herself off. "Where're you looking at?"

Ange tilted her head quizzically. "Kelvin?"

"Ange, I'm sorry it took me this long to realize how you feel. I will now answer your feelings with all that I have." I reached into Clotho's Storage, pulling out Black Staff of Disaster with my right hand and Mad Holy Sword Clive with my left.

"You're ignoring me? Really?"

A high-pitched metallic sound rang out behind my back, but I blocked it out. It was the least of my worries now. After all, I had a trustworthy goddess protecting my six.

“What do you mean he’s ignoring you? Have you forgotten that your opponent is a Summoner?” Melfina asked as she appeared from a glowing magic circle, the tip of Holy Lance Luminary already pointed at Bahl.

“You’re...Melfina, the Goddess of Reincarnation.”

“I go by Mel when I’m here, though it won’t be long before I become Mel Celsius!”

“A goddess drowned in pleasure, then. As I thought, you are not fit to keep your seat. Very well. I shall carry out my duties as the Condemner and bring you judgment.”



Three dark figures sped like the wind, dashing through the streets of Gaun. They were heading for the arena where Ange had called Kelvin.

“Gramps, is what you just said true?”

“Arf?” (Really true?)

“I swear it. These eyes saw the truth while peeking! My king and Ange are in danger!”

The trio was Gerard, Rion, and Alex. While everyone else had disconnected from the Network out of consideration, Gerard had taken advantage of Kelvin leaving his line wide open to peek at what was happening. Then he had suddenly gone around rousing everyone, causing a commotion.

“Just when Ange was about to profess her love to my king, that red-haired girl appeared! And that very moment, my view got blocked!”

“Kel-nii did say we have to stay vigilant against Bahl. If what you’re saying is true, this really could be an emergency.”

“Arf, arf!” (We should hurry!)

“Yes, we should! Gramps, we’re gonna go ah—”

“STOP! There’s someone up front!”

Just as Rion and Alex were about to take off, Gerard roared at Rion in an uncharacteristically sharp voice. The coliseum was already in front of them. However, there was a figure standing in their way. It was a man wearing torn, ragged clothing with a katana hanging at his waist. This, along with his disheveled black hair, gave him the appearance of an adventurer back from a long journey.

“Hey, there. We meet again,” he said, raising a hand in greeting.

Rion recognized him. She had seen him quite recently. “You’re my...”

This was the nameless swordsman she had defeated in round three of the tournament. His slack posture was the same as before, but he was now giving off an aura that made her hesitate to take him lightly.

“Rion, stay sharp. This man is strong.”

“Mister...you went easy on me when you fought me today?”

“Well, you see, I’m not so good with being the center of attention. And it’s not like I enjoy cutting young girls like you, so I surrendered before I knew it. Condemner did her best instead, so what’s the harm, right?”

The man looked down at the guard of his katana listlessly.

“Would you mind a little advice from this old man? Turn back. There are monsters fighting up ahead.”

At that moment, a thunderous roar blasted out from within the coliseum, sending a shock wave that washed over Rion and Gerard.

“See what I mean? Good children should be asleep at this time. It’d make me happy if you could do an about-face. This old mister wants to go home and sleep too.”

“I’m afraid we can’t do that, mister.”

“Grrrrr!”

“If you stand in our way, we’ll have no choice but to push past using force!”

The sight of Rion and Gerard drawing their weapons elicited a sigh from the man. “So we’re really going to do this? I guess I might as well introduce myself first. I’m Survivor of the Ninth Seat. Not exactly thrilled to make your acquaintance, but here we are.”



“Debilitate Scrimmage.”

Blue magic that looked like the exact opposite of Sera’s magic gathered at Bahl’s feet, flowing into her purple greaves through every available crevice. The greaves seemed on the verge of blowing apart from the raging torrent but then suddenly harmonized with the magic and changed forms. In contrast to how Sera’s Blood Scrimmage clad her fists in red armor, Bahl’s Debilitate Scrimmage clad her feet in blue armor. Due to the ominous yet polished form of her greaves, her height had risen from being on par with Rion’s to towering above the eye level of a normal adult male. Although not as firm and robust as her foot armor, there were also demonic horns protruding from her head, along with wings and a tail at her back, all enveloped in blue.

“Divine Aspect.”

In contrast, Melfina materialized her holy angelic wings. Pulses of holy energy emanated from them and flowed to permeate all her weapons and equipment. It truly looked like the stereotypical scene of an angel and a demon facing off, bearing a surprising similarity to the previous match between Melfina and Sera.

“The fact that you can use that technique confirms you really are a demon. Are you perhaps Sera’s younger sister?”

“As I said before, further conversation is unnecessary.”

These words were immediately followed by Melfina's holy lance clashing with Bahl's blue greaves.

Hmm, I was watching their exchange through the Network with Parallel Processing, but...yep, Bahl is a demon. What's more, she uses a technique that's similar to Sera's. Blood Scrimmage involves Sera's Unique Skills of Blood Dominion and Bloodbending, so it makes sense to assume Bahl's blue magic also has some special ability. All right, sort the information properly and...send to Melfina. Now it's time for me to focus on my own fight.

“You'll answer my feelings?” Ange parroted quizzically. “How? Will you let me chop your neck? Will you join my organization? I'd love it if so! Efil-chan could come along, and Rion-chan too! Ah, I'm afraid you'd have to leave Mel-san behind, but...”

“Sorry, neither works for me. There's no way I can say yes.”

“Then—”

“What I can do, however, is accept *you* into *my* party. Come to my house. Ange, live with me.”

“Huh?!”

“I've only just realized how attracted I am to you, Ange. And I said I can't let you cut my neck, but I meant that as in, I can't let you do it for nothing. I'd want you to respect time, place, and occasion, but generally speaking, you can come for it any time, any day! Of course, I'm not going to just roll over and let you do it; no, I'll fight back with all I have every time. So, what do you think? Oh, but if you want to chop necks, you'd have to limit yourself to mine alone—”

“W-Wait a—hold on, K-Kelvin, s-stop! STOP!”

I suddenly realized that Ange's face had turned as red as a tomato. She had both hands thrust forward and was waving them around in a fluster.

“What's the matter? There are still a lot of details about the rules for chopping my head and living at my house that I haven't explained yet.”

“It's already set in stone that I'd be moving in?! I-I mean, if those are the terms, then I, uh, I don't really need to take your head anymore...”

Ange pulled her hood forward as far as she could, covering the top half of her face. However, the bottom half that remained visible was still so flushed that I could tell without having to squint.

“D-Do you mean it?” she asked.

“Every last word. If you come and live with us, Efil and Rion will be over the moon. Most importantly, it would make me very happy.”

Ange fell silent, and I waited for her. During that time, the melody of battle continued playing behind my back, flowing into my ears.

“What are you doing, Assassin?! Y—”

“Excuse me, *I’m* your opponent!”

“Tch!”

Even while trying to look into Ange’s eyes, I was using one train of thought under Parallel Processing to keep an eye on Melfina’s situation. Bahl just happened to be in the middle of launching a counterattack right after having blocked one of Melfina’s spear thrusts with her right leg. The unending barrage of white and blue was so fast that there was no time to breathe in between, gradually bringing the rhapsody reverberating throughout the arena to a crescendo.

Although only barely so, Bahl was managing to keep up with Melfina, which was actually a very impressive feat. Thanks to her Unique Skill, Sympathetic Resonance, all of Melfina’s stats were the sum of my stats split evenly. The important part here is that after my Evolution from human to daemon, my max MP had shot through the roof. Consequently, every last one of Melfina’s stats was easily over three thousand at the moment. This was even higher than Demon Lord Zel’s stats after his fusion with Clive. It was true that Melfina was currently probing Bahl and had yet to get serious, but for her part, Bahl clearly still had cards up her sleeve. There was no way to know how strong she really was just yet.

There was something else that bothered me. The aura from Divine Aspect was supposed to dispel all buffs and debuffs from both Melfina and her opponent, and this would normally apply to Bahl’s Debilitate Scrimmage as well. However, every time the two clashed, it was Mel’s Divine Aspect that was worn down. I couldn’t tell if it was due to Bahl’s ability, but the sight did remind me of the time Mel had fought Sera and—

Oh, looks like Ange’s about to give me her answer.

After the long pause, Ange finally spoke. “Kelvin, I... I’m very happy...I think,” she said, seemingly struggling to find the right words. “You see, I tried to make opportunities to tell you how I felt so many times, but it never went well. So it makes me really happy to hear you say all that.”

“Then come with me, Ange. All of us will welcome you with open arms.”

“Thank...you.”

Ange seemed to be doing her best to convey her emotions. As I stared at the face hidden behind the hood, I noticed her waving her left hand slightly. Something flew out.

FLASH!

The “something” exploded in an intense burst of light, proving itself to be an item similar to a flash grenade. However, it did very little to blind me, as I was wearing a Goddess’s Ring. As a result, I had

no trouble seeing the dagger that flew through the light, heading straight for my neck. I dodged it with every ounce of speed I could muster with the help of the Sonic Acceleration spell I had cast on myself during the preceding moment of silence. Even so, the blade grazed me slightly, letting me know that I was still behind in terms of Agility. I cast Benediction Cure on the wound just in case the blade had been poisoned.

“Aha ha! But Kelvin, I can’t believe you! After all, I betrayed you! What you’re saying is just too good to be true. I can’t be tricked that easily!”

It was as if her embarrassment earlier had only been an act. The expression on her face framed by the hood with the cat ears told me how much she was enjoying this. More knives flew at me, all aimed at my vital spots, but I knocked them down using Mad Holy Sword Clive. However, the shock of the clashes traveled all the way up my arms. Clearly, I was inferior in Strength too. I couldn’t have been happier.

“I meant every word I said. You should know by now, given how long we’ve been together, I only do what I want and never do something because it’s the ‘right’ thing. All I want right now is you. I want you, Ange.”

“Wh—?!”

I knew the words weren’t enough to get through to her. Even so, I felt them shaking her heart just the tiniest bit. The door was still slightly open.

“Boreas Death Scythe.”

I converted Disaster into the grim reaper’s scythe, shifting to a two-handed hold. Clive floated in the air beside me in the same way I controlled Obsidian Edges, its tip pointed at Ange.

“I’ve said everything I want to say. All that’s left is to prove myself through my actions. Ange, I will now use everything I have to bring you back with me.”

“That’s...a self-serving declaration if I’ve ever heard one. In that case, I’ll also get serious about coming for your head. That *was* my original goal.”

“That would make me very happy.”

After all, this fight was one of my original goals.



It was pandemonium inside the coliseum. Which part, you ask? All of it. As it turned out, the purple barrier surrounding the stage only served to curtail our magical range and block us from leaving. It did nothing to contain the damage caused by our attacks, magical or otherwise. Shock waves, for example, had no problem passing through.

Melfina, we're about to start fighting.

::Oh? She rejected you that harshly? Do you want me to console you?::

As if. Ange and I are going to play together now!

::I know. I'm joking. I would love to be able to lend a hand, but they're both full with my current opponent at the moment. Look out for yourself.::

Gotcha. Keep this channel open.

While accepting Melfina's much-appreciated words of concern, I used both her point of view and mine to gain a thorough grasp of the state of the venue. Mel and Bahl's fight was everywhere, shifting from the stage to midair in the blink of an eye as they tore apart their surroundings without discrimination. Naturally, the stage was ruined. Worse than ruined. It was in such a bad state that it was beyond words. The beastkin would likely jump out of their skins when they saw it in the morning. Especially the stage-changing team.

At the same time, Ange and I were in the middle of the most enjoyable game of tag ever, with me using Sonic Acceleration and Fly to zip every which way within the barrier and her staying hot on my heels. I had no time to entertain questions like "You're running away after talking such a big game?" Ange was just that terrifying. The moment I entered her territory, my head would fly.

"Keelviin! Wait! For! Me!"

She stayed close behind me, her dagger held in a reverse grip at neck level. She would catch up if I stayed still for even a second, so I could only spam spells that could be cast quickly and without slowing down, such as Wind Shot and Impact.

None of them showed any signs of landing. She likely possessed Sky Walk, considering how she not only made impossible-looking turns in midair numerous times but even accelerated after doing so. She was so fast that I had to fully focus on all my detection skills just to keep track of her. Even now, she was easily making her way past the barrage of spells as if they were no more than hurdles on a track, slowly and steadily closing the distance.

Damn, is she faster than even the fastest two in my party, Efil and Melfina? Analyze Eye is still telling me she's an average person with only one or two digits in each stat. That's because of the thing she mentioned earlier, right? "Disguise"? I've no idea if that's a skill or something else, but I probably wouldn't be too far off thinking of it like the Beast King's Metamorphosis.

"Can you handle *this*?" I cast Air Pressure on the entire area within the barrier. When facing opponents with speed, it made sense to first take away that speed. I adjusted the spell so that it wouldn't affect Melfina and me and cranked it up high enough to the point

where the stage almost started buckling.

“Mm, mm, mm!”

She’s even started humming?! And she doesn’t seem any slower. In the first place, being able to maintain that speed under Air Pressure is impossible. Even Gerard would be straining.

“Tch.”

After clicking her tongue to express her annoyance, Bahl returned to her fight with Mel. I noticed that she was slightly affected by my spell, which made Ange’s performance all the stranger, as I had expected Bahl to be the one with the higher Strength stat.

Well, thinking about it doesn’t help me now. Ange’s almost caught up.

“Clive, go.”

The longsword that had been floating in midair on standby was none other than Mad Holy Sword Clive—or as I referred to it, the Pretty Clive. This was the reforged version of the sword I had picked up during the fight with Demon Lord Zel, Mad Sword Clive. It had been quite the undertaking purifying a blade that was practically oozing curse energy as if all the curses in the world had been packed into its length. I had also shrunk it from its original massive form to a much more manageable size. Its appearance remained as black as before, but it was technically now a holy sword. Thus, its new name.

Of course, there wasn’t even the faintest scrap of Clive’s consciousness left inside the sword, so all that about being pretty was just pure nonsense. In fact, it was actually pretty repulsive since it still contained tightly packed curse energy deep within.

On second thought, I might rename it the Dirty Clive.

Either way, I was still reluctant to let Rion use the finished product, so I had decided to use it myself. And now, I commanded it to attack Ange at the exact moment she used Sky Walk to evade an Impact...right after she changed directions...from a blind spot.

“That—”

My timing was perfect. I had fired a whole barrage of spells so densely packed it should have been impossible to dodge. At the very moment she accelerated, Mad Holy Sword Clive rushed at her back...and passed straight through.

“—was a close one! Whew!”

For a split second, I had trouble comprehending what had just happened. Mad Holy Sword Clive had indeed pierced Ange’s body. However, she resumed her chase of me as if nothing had occurred. That was not Clive’s ability, obviously, which meant it was Ange who had caused the phenomenon.

“Kelviin, could you not use this terrible, low-life philanderer against me? It kinda pisses me...off!”

While puffing her cheeks to make an angry expression, she took

out a knife from the inside of her jacket and threw it at the sword that had just passed through her. The knife hit the weapon on its hilt with a sharp, metallic clang. This was immediately followed by an explosion as the knife, which had probably been set up to explode upon contact with its target, blew up along with Clive. In other words, it was a knife-shaped bomb. Dirty Clive plunged to the ground, badly damaged.

“That’s sterilized now. Did you learn your lesson, Kelvin?”

“Mm, sorry, my bad. I’ll only use Clive against guys and monsters going forward.”

“Good. Glad to hear it.”

Ange and I were conversing with smiles on our faces, but by now, there was almost no distance left between us. And before long, she did indeed catch up to me.

“Hey, there,” I said as she stood before me, entirely unaffected by both Boreas Death Scythe and the Helix Barrier I had deployed. There was no longer any room for doubt. She was capable of slipping through both physical matter and magic. That was her ability.

“Mm-hm! I’ve finally caught you, Kelvin!” Ange had a gentle yet iron grasp on my right arm, the one holding the scythe. I could feel her warmth through the palm of her hand. Her other hand, the one holding the cold, gleaming dagger, approached my neck as she pronounced my death with a gentle smile. “I’ll be claiming your head now.”

I grinned. “I told you, didn’t I? That I’d fight you with all I have? And I...am a Summoner.”

“Huh?”

A white light illuminated Ange’s back. Although I didn’t have the ability to go so far as to Conceal it, I had managed to finish constructing the Summoning circle in the nick of time. My decision to start working on it as soon as I saw Ange phasing through Boreas Death Scythe had paid off. What’s more, I had also asked my companions to make their preparations inside my magic pool.

Ange, the fact that we’re talking means sound is reaching you, right?

I cast Silent Whisper on my own ears. *BOGA, ROAR AS LOUD AS YOU CAN!*

“ROOOOOOAAAAARRRRR!!!”

The massive sound wave breath attack that Boga unleashed the instant he emerged from the magic circle slammed into the arena, pounding it again and again until it started to crumble. Protuberances high up broke off and fell down, crashing into the spectator seats. That destruction led to further destruction, causing giant cracks that started running through the structure.

At the same time, the same thing was happening to Ange. She let

go of my arm, screaming silently. Apparently, her ability to remain impervious to everything was not applicable to sound waves. Or perhaps she *could* shut out sound but hadn't because she'd been taken by surprise. Either way, the breath attack infused with a stun debuff that Boga had unleashed at nearly point-blank range proved highly effective, leaving her body petrified and unresponsive.

Yeah, that attack really does a number when it lands squarely, regardless of Endurance. Did Ange's eardrums get blown out? There's no stopping now, though. This is the best opportunity I've had so far.

I propped my scythe against my shoulder and shifted to holding it with just one hand. I was going to attempt something that I had used only once in combat before. Back when I had fought the Heroes of Deramis, I'd borrowed Sera's Combat Technique skill and only barely managed to use it in conjunction with my magic to imitate her fighting style. Now, although I was still far from reaching her level of proficiency, I could pull the move off all on my own. So I clad my fist in wind with Green Magic, stabilized it, and unleashed a punch while I still had control over the whole thing.

"Guh!"

My uppercut drove deep into Ange's abdomen, delivering a chain of Hyper Impacts that went off inside her body in quick succession. As a result of packing a spell that would normally affect a large area into such a small space, the combined force dealt significant damage to her internal organs. The shock wave that followed threw her body into the air.

Boga, hold nothing back! Give it all you got!

Naturally, I was not stupid enough to refrain from taking full advantage of the opening. Just as Ange's body reached the top of its trajectory and started falling back down, Boga's powerful tail slapped her straight down towards the ground.

::Rooaar!::

As if that wasn't enough, the rock dragon matched her speed and followed her down to deal several more of the same blows, effectively making her accelerate again and again. Judging by the thuds, the attacks were properly making contact with her.

I'm impressed by how skillful Boga's gotten at moving. Is this thanks to Gerard's instruction? Regardless of how he normally acts, he's actually pretty good at teaching others. Everyone is just full of surprises.

Ange, who was now plummeting at incredible speed, had yet to show any sign of movement. At this rate, she would slam directly into the rubble-strewn ground. It was time for the next step.

Melfina, you good to go?

::Do you have to ask? I am one in body and spirit with you, honey. My timing is perfect.::

While Ange was falling, Melfina brought her battle with Bahl to the ground. Thanks to her skillful maneuvering, she now had the red-haired girl on one knee. Bahl was just about to get back up.

::Celsius Briar::

The moment Melfina tapped the butt of Holy Lance Luminary against the ground, briars made of ice burst out and began eating the entire arena. No, “eating” was a bit misleading. The briars were actually reinforcing the crumbling structure by freezing chunks of it together and holding them up through the strength of their tendrils.

“You... How can a mere artificial body...be this powerful?!”

The arena was not the only thing that the briars swallowed up—the same fate had also befallen Bahl, who had been on the ground at the time, and Ange, who had fallen straight into the spell. The growth wrapped itself around Bahl’s greaves and enveloped Ange from head to toe. Celsius Briar replicated endlessly and dealt damage with the slightest contact. Escaping its hold was nigh impossible.

Hey, Mel? It just occurred to me that the “Celsius” in Celsius Briar is exactly the family name we’ll be taking on. What do you think about incorporating this into the design of our family crest? Like, adding some briars and—

::Yes, let’s! In fact, we definitely should! Honey, promise me you will!::

Okaaay...

I was only spitballing, but Melfina latched onto my idea with so much zeal that it scared me a little. *I guess I’ll have to actually consider it for real. Gotta ask everyone for their opinion when we get back.*

“And when we have that talk, you have to be there too, Ange. So don’t you die on me.”

I Summoned Mdofarak, making it so that she, Boga, and I formed a triangular formation in the air above Ange and Bahl.

Mdofarak, once we’re done here, you get an all-you-can-eat sweets buffet by Efil. So give me all you got. Boga, you’ll be allowed to have as many seconds as you want for your next meal.

::Rawr?! Awr, rawr!::

::Rooaaar!::

And that did it for motivating the dragons. Efil’s cooking was the simplest way to ensure they did their best. *You greedy gluttons.*

::Honey, what about me?! Don’t I get to have as many seconds as I want?!::

It was true that Efil’s cooking was a great motivator, but it was a bit of a double-edged sword when it came to our gluttonous goddess. She single-handedly kicked our household’s Engel coefficient all the way into space. However, tough times called for tough measures.

Just the next meal! So focus on maintaining the briars! It’s not like

time actually stops when we communicate through the Network!

::Heh heh heh, looks like it's time for me to demonstrate what I'm truly capable of!::

For some reason, I felt like I had just made a pact with a devil. In any case, Ange and Bahl were now properly locked down. After Melfina retreated a safe distance, I unleashed a massive flying slash with Boreas Death Scythe, Mdotharak let out her Trinity Breath, and Boga blasted his sound wave breath attack.

How're you two going to handle this?

"Don't you...take me lightly!"

It was Bahl who moved first. A high-pitched mechanical sound emitted from her greaves, which then became covered with glowing bluish-purple lines. To my surprise, the briars that were tying her feet down cracked and crumbled.

"Debilitate Slash!"

Bahl kicked twice, sending two blue crescent-moon arcs flying skyward. They increased in momentum after overlapping like the letter X, taking almost no time at all to clash into the combined attack unleashed by my dragons and me. The slash from Boreas Death Scythe managed to pass straight through, but the two breath attacks abruptly lost all their destructive power the moment they made contact with Bahl's attacks, with both sides seemingly canceling each other out.

"Tch! I have bad compatibility with that one. Assassin, how much longer are you going to keep sleeping? That slash is going to kill us both." Bahl turned to look in Ange's direction, but no answer came. "Okay, fine! Brace yourself a while longer. I'll pale the color of the ice briars and your debuff—"

"No need."

After murmuring her reply, Ange abruptly sat up from within the mass of briars like it was nothing. Her ability to phase through things was back, meaning the Stun debuff from Boga's attack had worn off. However, her wounds remain—

"Aha ha!" In the blink of an eye, she was again closing in on me, a bright smile on her face.

"What?!" That can't be! She just woke up! The speed at which she's kicking through the air's even faster than before. Was she going easy on me earlier?!

My companions and I immediately threw attacks at Ange in an attempt to delay her, but she did not slow down in the slightest thanks to her godlike reflexes and ability to slip through everything.

Aren't you still wounded?! You're making me love you more and more!

She was making a beeline straight for me, entirely uninterested in the dragons. Her momentum was so great that she ended up phasing clear through me.

“Ugh!”

Even so, she made sure to leave me gifts while passing by. Her dagger left a deep, burning cut on my left arm as a poisoned kunai knife ended up in my stomach. I hadn't the faintest idea how her coat worked.

“Don't throw that many at me at once!” I silently muttered in awe. Even with Sonic Acceleration active, I had been unable to evade everything in time.

“Now, Kelvin! It's about time to end this fight!”

After phasing through me, Ange instantly used Sky Walk to change directions and close in once more with her unbelievable speed. As before, she threw countless daggers and kunai my way. Although they were all quite small, their overall mass clearly exceeded what her coat could hold. And that was not the only thing.

FLASH!

There were even flash grenades scattered here and there within the rain of blades. *As soon as you forget about them and all that, right?* Whereas last time Ange had used only one, this time there were so many that they overwhelmed me even though I still had my Goddess's Ring on. I ended up taking a kunai in the right shoulder and another directly in the wound previously made by the dagger in her hand. The latter served as a literal illustration of the phrase “gouging an old wound.” What's worse, it was poisoned. Although I had a certain resistance to pain thanks to my normal everyday life, this was enough to make me grit my teeth. I activated an immediate antidote spell in an attempt to alleviate the symptoms, but it didn't help much.

Ange, you should teach Grostina how to make this poison. I'm sure it'd make her super happy. But damn, I sure am getting poisoned a lot today.

::Bad news, honey. The way Sympathetic Resonance works, when you get poisoned, I get poisoned too. I've basically lost the edge I had over Bahl just now::

Oh right, I forgot about that.

Melfina's Unique Skill, Sympathetic Resonance, made it so that her Status reflected mine. When I buffed myself with a spell, she would receive the buff too. The same went for debuffs. In other words, she had actually been suffering quite a bit during my fights throughout the tournament. It hadn't bothered her too much, as she had been occupied with eating the entire time. However, now that she was in the middle of battle, she was fully feeling the effects.

How bad is it?

::I'm now only on equal footing with her. Please just remember that the worse your situation gets, the more disadvantaged I become as well::

On the ground, Melfina and Bahl were resuming their fight. Bahl

now seemed unaffected by the Celsius Briars on the ground, seeing as she was easily trampling them and unleashing her kicks with graceful, flowing motions.

Does she have an ability that lets her ignore certain types of damage? I really need to finish this fight immediately. With me poisoned, the longer it lasts, the worse off both Mel and I will be.

::Grrrr....::

Boga and Mdofarak were watching closely from a distance, ready to provide cover fire should the opportunity arise. But Ange and I were too close to each other. Even then, Ange would probably just phase through their attacks, and I would be the only one to get hurt.

You know what? It's time to go all in. I can use this.

I had no choice but to end things then and there. And there was only one way to do it.

Boga! Mdofarak! Shoot your breath attacks at me for as long as you can, over as large an area as possible!

::Roar?!::

::Rawr?!::

Your concern makes me happy, but it's fine. Just do it! Ange's nearly on me already!

Obediently, both ancient dragons unleashed the most powerful breath attacks they were capable of. They reached me at almost the same time Ange did.

“Aha ha! Did you go mad, Kelvin?!”

“Oh, I'm sane! As much as I always am!”

Despite possessing the ability to phase through things, Ange had dodged quite a few of my attacks so far. If her power had made her completely invincible, she could have come straight for me, ignoring everything I threw her way. And yet, that was not what she did. In other words, there were limits to her power, be it number of uses, duration, or MP cost.

What's more, every time she attacked me, she invariably disabled her power. When she passed through me, my fingers had felt her for the briefest moment. In all likelihood—no, I was sure that her power only covered the volume of her body and equipment. There was no way for her to extend it to her weapon *and* attack with the weapon at the same time, and she was not using the power nonstop. There were definitely limits to her usage of it.

“I'm! Coming! For! You! Now!”

Thanks to having an abundance of MP, I was able to spam spells at her. She dodged them all, but that was fine, as they were only meant to be a smoke screen. My real attacks, the ones I was actually relying on to make her use up her phasing ability, were the flying slashes with Boreas Death Scythe that I was throwing at her among

the spells.

We were now almost within arm's reach of each other. However, there was something else that got to me first: the attacks from the dragons. The entire space around me was swallowed up in a multicolored torrent of energy. It made me happy to see how much stronger Mdofarak and Boga had become. *How long can my Helix Barrier last?!*

“ANGEEEEEEEE!”

“Aha! Kelvin!”

It was time for our touching reunion. Boreas Death Scythe was unwieldy at such a close distance, so I disabled it and threw Black Staff of Disaster into Storage, exchanging it for the Black Sword Aklama that I'd made for myself while forging the two others for Rion so that I could have a matching weapon with her.

Now that Clive is hurt and barred from use, I'll be using this to end the fight, Ange!

“Hn!”

For the briefest moment, Ange was actually hurt by the breaths. However, she simply reactivated the phasing ability without flinching. She had clearly resolved herself to taking damage in that brief window so as to pass through my Helix Barrier. The next time she let her body come back would be the instant she took my head.

“*Huff, huff...* No one else to come between us here in your barrier.”

“So it seems. It's finally just the two of us.”

“Ah! There you go with those lines again!”

CLANG!

I blocked Ange's dagger with Aklama multiple times. I couldn't tell if it was because she was exhausted or flustered, but she did not use her special ability again.

“I'll say it as many times as you want. I love you, Ange.” I plucked out the kunai still in my shoulder and threw it back at her. It stabbed her in the right thigh.

“Nn! I... I love you too! I came to...*love* you little by little! The feeling just got bigger and bigger!”

Ange's kick landed squarely in my flank. The gouging pain that shot through my body told me that she had hidden a blade in the sole of her shoe.

“Guh! Then why?!”

I grabbed the leg she had just used to kick me and plunged Aklama into it.

“Ugh! But I betrayed you! I approached you at the start with ulterior motives! It was for a mission! But! But I...”

Ange used both hands to thrust her dagger into my left shoulder.

She even started jiggling it around.

“So what? I’m all for fighting you. But Ange, I don’t want to be enemies with you! The only thing that matters is this love I feel!”

I grabbed her head, which had bowed forward when she stabbed me, by the back and forcefully pulled it towards me.

“Wh—? Mmmm?! Huh? We, huh?!”

I forcibly pressed her lips against mine. They tasted strongly of blood, but a faint sweet hint came through. For a moment, Ange froze and grew flustered. I hugged the very cute girl close to me.



Clotho, do it.

My slime buddy emerged from my robe, Astarte's Embrace, and swallowed her up. I mentally apologized to Ange for being so pushy, despite the word "embrace" ironically being in the name of my equipment.

Without further ado, Clotho activated Absorption.

"Ah? Ugh... Kel...vin..."

"You can rest now, Ange. Let's talk later. About our future together."

The strength behind the knives in my side and shoulder drained away, leaving only Ange's soft, warm body in my arms. Thankfully, her constitution wasn't like Colette's, and she simply got sleepy when her MP reached zero. I asked Clotho to remove the blades in me, took a deep breath, and cast recovery spells on myself. The stench of blood was fragrant, true, but I focused on healing properly.

I've knocked Ange out! Now it's only Bahl left!

The moment I announced my victory, the barrier surrounding the arena shattered with a loud crash.

What happened?!

"It finally broke! Gosh, do you know how much blood I had to use? Oh, it's Kelvin! Kelvin, I came to help!" Sera shouted from high up in the sky.

Reinforcements had arrived. My demon companion's timing was impeccable, as always.

::Oh no, you're badly hurt, Kelvin! And Ange too!::

Oh right, the barrier blocked the Network, so Sera and the others don't know what's going on here. Wow, credit to them for noticing I was in danger. Was it Sera's exceptionally sharp intuition at work?

I pointed down below and spoke through the Network. *Ange and I are fine. Sera, Melfina's still fighting Bahl. Go help her, please.*

If anything, I would have loved to jump right into my second fight of the night, but I wasn't stupid enough to think I could stand up to Bahl in the condition I was in. Providing cover fire from a distance was the best I could do. I did have Ange to take care of too.

::Okay! Leave the rest to me!::

Sera charged forward, Blood Scrimmage already wreathing both arms.

Boga, Mdoafarak, I'm sorry, I know you're tired, but please continue providing cover fire. Remember, Bahl is really powerful. Don't get too close, and don't let your guard down.

::Rawr!::

::Roaaar!::

Their replies reverberated loudly through the Network, then the

dragons soared overhead and began raining down their breath attacks. They did not seem to be exhausted in the least, probably because they were imagining their promised reward drawing closer by the minute. Dragons were easy to bribe. Then again, so were goddesses.

“Sera Baal?! How did you— Ah, you must have slipped past Survivor. As for Assassin...”

Ah, Bahl and I locked eyes. Hey, I may be too far away to hear you, but I know you just clicked your tongue!

“Bahl, this is checkmate,” Melfina declared. “Now, tell us what your goal is.”

“Melfina, Goddess of Reincarnation... It irks me to ask you for something, but make sure you take good care of Assassin. She’s a bit mentally unstable but a good girl at heart. If you mistreat her, I’ll kill you.”

“Huh? What do y— Wait a—”

Before Melfina could press her further, Bahl shot off towards one of the contestant entrances, blue wind blasting from the bottom of her greaves à la rocket propulsion. She was extremely fast, although not quite as fast as Ange was by the end of our fight.

::Argh, she got away!::

::Honey, I’m hungry::

That’s not an apology. But I suppose I’m partly at fault this time.

I wanted to shout, “Chase her!” But I was still poisoned, which meant that Mel was also poisoned. Bahl’s speed was greater than what even Sera could manage.

::What should we do, Kelvin?: the demon asked.

Hold on a moment. I want to get everyone on the same page first. The fact that you’re here means Rion and the others are also on their way, right?

I used Parallel Processing to sort through all the information on the Network while uploading what I had learned.

::Okay, here’s the info from Kelvin. Lemme see... Huh?! Ange did what?! Oh my g— Wait, A KISS?!::

Ah, I shouldn’t have put everything up there.



The sound of blades clashing rang through the streets of Gaun. The avenue, which would be flooded with foot traffic come daylight, was normally quite lively late at night too. And of course, the hot-blooded beastkin loved fights and duels more than anything. In spite of all that, for some reason, there wasn’t a single spectator to be seen.

“Hmph!”

“Rah!”

Three black blades rushed towards a middle-aged man as shadows

clung to one of his feet, rooting it in place. He managed to deflect two of the three attacks using his katana in spite of the situation, but the third one slipped through. It left a deep gash in his chest, drawing a fountain of blood.

“You two... Your power is simply absurd.”

“You’re one to talk...you monster.”

“Gramps, his wound is disappearing again!”

Halfway through Rion’s sentence, the wound on the man’s chest had already healed without leaving so much as a scar. During this fight, Rion and the others had dealt numerous fatal blows, including chopping off the man’s limbs, stabbing his heart, and burning him to a crisp with lightning. He should have died many times over, but he simply got back up again every time. Thanks to his absurdly effective regenerative power, all the injuries he suffered disappeared a moment later. It was almost as if he couldn’t die.

“I may look shabby, but I remind you that I was given the title ‘Survivor’ for a reason. I’m pretty good at stepping between life and death, if nothing else.”

“I think you’ve gone far beyond just being good at it...” Rion was starting to get impatient. It was true that she could just ignore this Survivor person and run past him, but he would likely chase her. Depending on the situation, that could end up worsening Kelvin’s plight. If possible, she wanted to take the guy down then and there. But even without his healing ability, his skill with the sword was nothing to scoff at.

“Arf? Aroo...” (What to do? He seems extra careful about blocking my sword too.)

“I have no idea. If only we could use the Network...”

“There’s no point fixating on what we don’t have right now, Rion. All we can do is continue trying to defeat him.”

Gerard adjusted his grip on Demon Sword Dainsleif. Every time the sword cut Survivor, it sucked up his MP, fueling the knight’s continued usage of his Unique Skill, Glory Within Mine Hands, and keeping him buffed. This cycle worked greatly in Gerard’s favor, but he wasn’t really feeling its efficacy when his opponent kept getting back up no matter how many times he was cut down.

“To be entirely truthful, I’m not a fan of pain,” said their opponent. “You sure you can’t just give up and go home? It would make this old man really happy.”

“Well, what do you think?” Gerard retorted.

“I... Fair point. All right, I guess it’s time for this old man to get a little serious, then.”

Survivor abruptly returned his katana to its sheath and changed his stance. Even though Alex was using Creeping Darkness to root his

feet to the ground, he still managed to shift them, albeit somewhat slowly.

Hm? That pose looks the same as the one used by that Hero lass.

Gerard recognized the stance. It was for iai, the quick draw technique used by Shiga Setsuna, one of the Heroes of Deramis he met in Toraj.

“You see, the basic premise behind the style I practice is to ‘cleave the flesh and sever the bone.’ I really mean it when I say I hope you don’t approach me.” The atmosphere surrounding Survivor turned tense and threatening.

“Rion, be careful.”

“Mm, I know. There’s probably no way to dodge the attack. And we don’t have any spells that can properly finish him o—”

Just as the battle seemed to reach an impasse, something flew in from afar with unbelievable speed.

“Hm?!”

Survivor’s sword flashed and bisected the projectile. The two halves of the arrow—for that’s what it was—shot past him and generated an incredible explosion of blue flames upon hitting the ground. As if that wasn’t enough, more followed in quick succession, all flying with incredible precision.

“No, no, no, no, what are... Hold on... What on—”

Survivor managed to cut down the first four arrows, but the fifth landed squarely on his forehead. Although it did not kill him, it did make his body arc back. With perfect timing, the arrow exploded as if to finish him off.

“Sera-san and I have finished examining the nearby buildings. They are all empty.”

Efil appeared from the cloud of dust rising from the remains of the very houses she just claimed to have examined, clad in her usual battle-maid outfit.

“Job well done, lass!”

“Both residents and tourists were distancing themselves from the area surrounding the coliseum in what appeared to be a form of mass hypnosis.”

“Um, Efil-nee...did you *have* to destroy those houses?”

“Master’s safety comes before all else. Sera-san has already gone ahead to the coliseum. I’ll help, so let’s finish things here as soon as possible and go join her!”

Blue flames roared as arrows—no, arrow-shaped bombs continued flying from Efil’s bow, Penumbra, in an unending bombardment. Rion realized this was one of the rare times Efil was actually on the verge of flying off the handle.

“Hold on, lass.”

“What is it, Gerard-san? Ah, should I make my flames even

hotter?”

“He’s gone.”

Rion and Efil turned to look at where the explosive arrows had been landing. They were expecting to see Survivor’s recovered form, but he was gone.

CRACK!

Right at that moment, a loud shattering sound came from the direction of the coliseum.



A young girl was leaning against a tree deep within the forest outside of the capital of Gaun. Her red hair, which was tied in a side ponytail, swayed gently in the night breeze. She had her arms crossed and eyes closed as if waiting for someone.

“You’re late, Survivor.”

“Aw shucks, looks like I made you wait a while. Thanks for not leaving me behind; I was actually kind of worried!”

A middle-aged man with a katana suddenly appeared in front of the red-haired girl, Bahl. The wounds he had suffered from Rion’s group had vanished without a trace, but his clothing had not gotten off unscathed. He was practically naked from the waist up.

“I swear I came as soon as I heard the mission was over. There’s just no beating you young’uns when it comes to speed—”

“Didn’t you start running before the barrier went down?” Bahl asked in a disinterested tone while tapping the ground with her greaves, which had reverted to their normal look.

“Goodness, your detection abilities never cease to impress me.”

“Whatever. Let’s head back already. We’re not safe here.”

“Sounds good to me.”

The pair took off, dashing southwest through the forest.

“So, that mission just now... Doesn’t it make you wonder why Our Lady sent three Apostles on a single assignment when there are already so few of us?”

“That’s how much of a threat Melfina is. Why else do you think She had both Assassin and Analyzer monitor her?”

“That may be true, but *her* Apostle...uh, Kelvin, isn’t it? The party he leads is really something. They’re all as powerful as Rank S adventurers.”

“Hmph! In any case, we’ve achieved the most crucial objective. Although we failed to kill the Goddess of Reincarnation’s Apostle, we still managed to slow him down. We’re in the last phase of the Plan now. Everything will be over soon.”

For some reason, Bahl sounded like she was in a bad mood.

“So, uh...we gonna just leave Assassin behind?”

“She has to make her own choice now. Either way, I’ll take the punishment for it. That’s all right with you, isn’t it?”

“When all’s said and done, you really are kind at heart. You won’t hear this old man complaining, but I do wonder what Arbitrator will say...” He scratched his head with a brief grimace, scattering dandruff around. “I’m the latest addition to the Apostles, so I don’t know the rest of you all that well, but I do know you two interacted a lot and got on well. Weren’t you friends?”

“You’re getting on my nerves now, you know that? It’s not like we were that close. She just kept talking at me, that’s all.”

“I may not look like it, but I have a few years under my belt. No one would think any less of you for crying now, you know?”

“Drop dead.”

“That’s a bit harsh!”

Bahl’s comment stabbed Survivor in the chest. It seemed as if psychological wounds were more effective on him than physical ones.

“Well...thanks for the concern. Not that we were friends. And one correction: I’m a *lot* older than you are.”

“Uh...seriously?”

“Mm. You can’t judge a demon by appearance— Why’re you looking at my chest?! I really will kill you.”

“I was only thinking that kids nowadays develop rather slowly...”

The first rays of sun peeked over the eastern horizon, breaking through the dark of night. At that exact same moment, the sound of something being squashed rang out from deep within the forest, sending a flock of wild birds into the air.



After Bahl ran away, Sera, Melfina, and I immediately regrouped with Efil, Rion, Gerard, and Alex. There was a bit of a ruckus when Melfina dispelled Celsius Briar and the entire coliseum collapsed, but the girl in my arms meant much more to me, so I only sent word to the castle and pretended not to see the ruins around us.

On the way back, I noticed a few buildings and houses that seemed to have been blown up, but I pretended not to see them either. *I’m sure Future Me will do something about all that. More power to you, man!*

While Melfina and I had fought Assassin and Condemner—or Ange and Bahl—Rion’s group had been in combat with a swordsman who called himself Survivor. It took almost no time to get both sides back up to date after the purple barrier was destroyed and our access to the Network was restored, but the matter with Ange could not be resolved as easily. Before anything else, we brought her back to my room at the inn. She was still fast asleep, so I tucked her into bed,

disarmed her, and placed special bindings on her just in case.

Immediately after that, an emergency meeting was held in my room. And that was where the problem began. The only ones there were the girls: Efil, Sera, Rion, and Melfina. I was made to sit in seiza pose on the floor.

Sera kicked things off. "So, what do you have to say for yourself, Kelvin?"

"About?"

"Kissing Ange, obviously!"

Uh-oh. Now I'm paying for not having fudged the data in time. It was great that Efil and Rion were smiling—cheerfully and wryly, respectively—but Sera was obviously outraged. As for Melfina...it was time for her nighttime snack, so her mind was somewhere else. However, I could sense through the Network that she was somewhat bothered deep inside.

"I thought it was the only way to reach her. When words don't work, all that's left are actions, right?"

That fight with Ange was incredible. Sadly, I didn't get the opportunity to use my newly acquired Unique Skill, but it was still a wonderful time with the two of us being entirely open with our feelings and fighting all out. If the fight had lasted any longer, though, I was sure that one of us would have exhausted ourselves. Thus the kiss. Admittedly, part of it had been a calculated move to catch her off guard, but it had also been a demonstration of my resol—

"And the truth?"

"Ange's cute face was really close. I couldn't help myself."

Okay, yes, I was only making excuses in the beginning there. The truth is that I gave in to temptation. Of course, I wouldn't do something like that while in my right mind. I'm a gentleman, after all. But I was in battle at the time and highly excited. The blood had gone to my head. As a battle junkie, I just can't help—

"Kelvin, you realize that makes you a terrible person, right? Yes, we all expected Ange to tell you about her feelings, but you shouldn't have forced yourself on her! According to the information on the Network, she hadn't given her consent at the time!"

"You're entirely right. I am very sorry."

Yep, doing this kind of thing against someone's will is always wrong, no matter the situation. Even though Ange told me she had feelings for me, I was no better than a beast doing what I did.

"It's Ange you should be apologizing to, not me. And Ange! How much longer do you plan on pretending to be asleep?!"

"I'm very sorry!" Ange shouted, leaping up in bed and immediately assuming the seiza pose.

You were awake? Damn, her acting was so good, even I got fooled. I

guess there's no getting past Sera's detection abilities.

"It's a pretty big deal that Ange killed Kelvin, but that doesn't matter right now!"

"Huh? It doesn't?" *I feel like it kinda should...at least a bit?*

"All that matters is how she feels. Ange, how do you feel about Kelvin?"

"Ummm...I did betray him and all of you, so I don't really have the right to—"

"Do. You. Love. Him?!"

"Y-Yes, I do, ma'am!"

"So, what do you want to do now?"

"I... Honestly, I'm not sure." She hung her head and started speaking haltingly. "I was, uh, monitoring Kelvin and Mel-san—I mean, Goddess Melfina, under Arbitrator's orders. I was told to always keep an eye on where they were and how they were doing, and to beguile Kelvin if there was an opportunity. But, aha ha, I was the one who ended up falling for him instead."

"How did this Arbitrator person know Mel and I would show up in Parth?" I asked curiously.

"I have no idea. All I do is follow her orders, so I don't know where she gets her info from. What I do know is that Our Lady sometimes gives her prophecies."

"Prophecies, hm?" Melfina murmured with a pensive look from where she sat next to a mountain of now-empty plates. "Ange, would Arbitrator happen to be a woman with silver hair?"

Melfina-sensei, we're having a serious talk right now. Please restrain your gluttonous nature a little.

After a brief pause, Ange nodded. "Yes, she is. I guess it makes sense that you'd catch on. Her real name is Iris Deramilius. She's a former Oracle of Deramis who summoned the Hero Serge Flore to defeat Demon Lord Gustav."

"And the one she is now serving as Oracle, the one giving her prophecies, is Elearis, the previous Goddess of Reincarnation?"

"What? You figured it out too, Kelvin?"

"Pretty much." *Mere speculation not backed by any evidence, but still. Even I'm surprised by how Melfina's and my empty guesses turned out to be so on point.*

"Arbitrator is creating Apostles by borrowing Our Lady's power to reincarnate souls that have died before. That's what she did to me too. We were gathered to carry out Our Lady's bidding—all of us were reincarnated. Several of us are quite incredible, really. That includes Creator, who you guys fought in Trycen."

"Apostles, huh? How many of you are there?"

"There are a total of nine—oh wait, with me gone, it's eight—oh

no, it's probably back to nine now."

"Huh?" *Why's the number fluctuating so much?*

"Regardless, be careful of them. I met Our Lady when I was reincarnated, though I don't remember much of it. Reincarnated souls are granted skills so powerful they're, uh, I think Protector calls them 'cheats'? And I'm pretty sure the Plan is almost complete."

"Cheats" as in for computer games? Hmm, so Elearis is creating the ultimate pawns for herself. But...

"Ange, why're you telling us all this? You belong to this organization too, don't you?"

"Well...I guess you can call this my atonement, maybe? Aha ha, I don't even know. I do feel thankful to Arbitrator for giving me a second chance at life, but there's an even bigger part of me that doesn't want to betray you further. Frankly, after blabbing this much, I don't think I'll be able to make it back anyway. Looks like my connection to them has been cut off..."

Ange forced a smile onto her face. She looked extremely lost, as if she were at a complete loss for what to do with her life next.

"So you *have* already decided what you want to do now," Sera interrupted.

"Huh?" Ange started.

"If you can't return, all that's left is to stay with Kelvin, who reciprocates your feelings! That works, right? Okay, it's decided!"

Ange's eyes opened wide in surprise. "S-Sera-san?"

I shot Sera a look. *Sera, didn't you just scold me for forcing people into things? Not that I'm going to protest against this, though. In fact, good job!*

"Congratulations, Ange-san!" Efil exclaimed, clapping her hands.

"Welcome to our family. As your friend, I couldn't be happier."

"Are you sure about this, Efil-chan? Why— Whoa, you're crying?!"

"Because your feelings...finally got across..." Tears streamed down Efil's face, leaving Ange flustered.

I cleared my throat. "Ange, all of us—including me, of course—love you very much. If you can't return to your organization, then let's stay together. We might have to take on Elearis and work to stop her somewhere down the line, but there's no need for you to worry about that. I'll take all responsibility for your life."

"Why... Why are all of you being so nice to me?! I *killed* Kelvin!"

Ah, now even Ange's crying. But that question's a stupid one. Absolute nonsense. "You do know it was more like a reward for a battle junkie like me, right? Dying in a fight against someone I love and who is more powerful than me is the only way I'd want to go. Both Efil and Sera understand that."

“Not that I’d ever let you die again!”

Thanks, Sera. I’m counting on you.

“Is Kelvin...sniff...a masochist?”

“I’m gonna stop you right there, Ange. That’s a misunderstanding. I see where you’re coming from, but that’s definitely not it. I feel like you said that on purpose, though, didn’t you?”

Well, it’s nothing new—I still remember the times she pretended to be a big sister and teased me this way. Come to think of it, she was probably an Apostle back then too, but that smile had been entirely from her heart.

“Heh heh, I’m joking, Kelvin-kun! So then, um...would you have me?”

I was already hugging Ange before I knew it, wiping the tears from her eyes. Even though her voice was quivering a little, her smiling self seemed as dazzling as the first time I met her.



Afterwards, we decided to have a small party to celebrate Ange joining us. Everyone brought over the snacks that they had bought as souvenirs, and we stayed up till the wee hours of the night. I suppose “slumber party” is an apt term to describe what it was—everyone was wearing their pajamas. Normally, we would have called Ruka and Shutola to join us, but it was very late at night, and they were already fast asleep. Shutola’s guards, Huba and Rosalia, were taking shifts protecting her, so they turned down our invitation as well. Pity.

Melfina had seemed deep in thought about something, but then her eyes began to sparkle once she saw all the new snacks. Part of me wanted to tell her to restrain herself, since she had only just finished her nighttime “snacking,” but I swallowed the words.

I’m sure her being the Goddess of Reincarnation means she has a lot more to consider in regards to what we’ve learned. I really should sit down to have a good, long talk with Ange and go through everything she knows.

Our newest member, the star of the party, sat between Efil and me from start to end, fully enjoying herself. Was it because her hesitation had disappeared or because she had gotten over what had happened? She gave off the cheerful aura that I remembered from our first date. It had been quite a while since I’d seen her this happy.

Unfortunately, happy times always seemed to fly by, and the sun was rising before we knew it. Everyone was emanating a “phew, everything’s over!” atmosphere, but the final fight of the Beast King Festival still awaited Sera and me. So we ended the party at a good time and disbanded to go get some sleep.

Hm? “Who’s sleeping in which room?” There have been a lot of stupid questions today. There’s no need to even ask.

“I-I-I-I’m sleeping with Efil-chan and K-K-K-Kelvin?!!”

“Obviously. Why do you seem so surprised, Ange?”

“Of course, Ange-san.”

Everyone else headed back to their own rooms. Originally, it had been Sera and Mel’s turn to sleep with me tonight, but they had been considerate. *I’m so thankful to them.*

“Let me go, Sera! It’s my turn tonight! *My turn!*”

“Okay, all right, stop throwing a tantrum like a kid. You’re sleeping in my room tonight, Mel. Good night, Kelvin.”

“MY TUUUURN!”

Mel’s voice faded into the distance as Sera dragged her down the hall and turned a corner. *I’m sure that’s her way of being considerate.*

“All right, we gotta wake up in four hours to get ready. Let’s get to sleep already, Ange.”

There was one double bed in my room. In other words, the three of us had to share it. I dove in first. All said and done, I had been on the verge of death many times yesterday and had actually died once. I felt pleasantly fatigued, which made me very sleepy.

“I...I’ve dreamed of this for so long, I just... My heart! I’m not ready for— Huh?! Efil-chan, you’re so fast! You just slipped into bed like it’s the most natural thing to do!”

“Yes?” Efil, who had already snuggled up to me on my right and was about to sleep, lifted her head sleepily.

I patted the area to my left. “Come on, Ange.” I heard her gulping audibly, but I was only hanging on by a thread by then.

“O-Okay! Kelvin, I’m coming in!”

“Zzz...”

“Zz...zz...”

“You’re already asleep?! You’re *both* already asleep! Wait, I—”

Right before I blacked out, I thought I heard Ange’s flustered voice and felt a warmth that was different from Efil’s snuggling up to me.



“Good morning, Master. We have wonderful weather today.”

Although I had only gotten a few hours of sleep, I woke up feeling great. As always, Efil had woken up earlier and already changed into her maid uniform. On my other side, however, Ange was still fast asleep. She had an arm loosely thrown over mine and was both drooling and mumbling softly. The sight almost made me doubt whether she was truly the same assassin who had taken my life the night before, but I’m happy to say she was. What’s more, she looked really cute.

Our original schedule had us getting up to eat breakfast and then heading over to the arena afterwards. As you might recall, however,

the venue for the Beast King Festival was...well...no longer standing. During the intense fight last night, the place had been reduced to rubble. It had maintained its look somehow when Melfina had used Celsius Briar to prop it up, but as soon as she released the spell, everything had come crumbling down. Berating Yesterday Me wouldn't be of much help. I had no idea what the Beast King would say, but I decided to accept my fate and to see him.

"Or at least, I'd planned to, but..."

"Looks like things got really out of hand."

The area around the coliseum was completely swamped with spectators and soldiers alike, all raising a ruckus. Of course, the destroyed structure was a large part of it, but the commotion was also partly due to the mass of people who had found themselves moving for no reason last night, almost as if they had been sleepwalking. From what I picked up from nearby conversations, they had simply found themselves standing outside far from the coliseum with no memories of how they'd gotten there.

"Aha ha," Ange laughed sheepishly, a cold sweat running down her back. "Looks like the Bewildering Incense we got from Creator worked a little too well. We'd hoped to avoid unnecessary commotion by using it, but I guess we didn't think about the aftermath."

She explained that the incense had been entirely odorless and that after it was scattered around an area, all living beings in the vicinity would fall asleep and move to a specified location. The size of the area it affected depended on the level of the person using it. It was a one-use item, but the more I heard about it, the more it alarmed me. *And this was made by "Creator" Jildora, right? That man really is formidable.*

"The final match of the Beast King Festival that was supposed to take place today has been postponed! Everyone, calm down—"

The soldiers repeatedly shouted their announcement, but it was far from enough to calm the chaotic crowd. In fact, I expected the commotion to continue for a while, considering how the tournament had been a big enough event to stir the country into a frenzy.

I guess these observations might sound strange coming from me, someone who took part in destroying the place. But I'm sure the Beast King can handle things. Once the hubbub dies down, I can even rebuild the coliseum for him with Obsidian Fortress, so I hope he forgives me. Hmm, I feel like I'm forgetting something, but... Nah, I'm done here.

I decided to spontaneously give everyone the day off, and we dispersed. As I was wondering what to do for the day, Ange approached me, bringing Efil with her.

"Kelvin, do you have some time?"



Before long, I found myself at a slave merchant's place. It was located outside the city, so there wasn't all that much foot traffic. And for some reason, there were no beastkin in the area. The shop itself was also a size smaller than the one I'd visited in Parth.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked.

"Mm." Ange nodded.

Even though it was clear that Ange had already made up her mind, we had repeated this exchange many times. Efil did not seem against the idea either, so I suppose it wasn't my place to say anything.

The portly merchant looked up when we stepped into the store. When I saw that he was human, it reminded me that while I was looking into Gaun before coming over, I had read that beastkin had a strong dislike of getting involved with the slave-trading industry. *So that's why I didn't see any of them on the way here.*

The moment the merchant laid eyes on me, he froze as if time had stopped. Several seconds later, he shouted, "K-K-K-K-K-Kelvin-samaaaa?!"

What's with that face? You act like you're looking at a monster. I'm not Prettia. Just saying.

::Kelvin, you really should be more aware of the fact that you're a Rank S adventurer,:: Ange chided me. ::After yesterday's matches, you got a lot more famous in Gaun, and a lot of people now recognize your face. You coming here is like a king dropping by a cafeteria for the masses.::

Oh, so that's why he was so shocked when I pulled back my hood. At any rate, seems Ange's already mastered how to use telepathy through Clotho.

"Hm? Is there something on my face?"

"N-No, sir! There's nothing! I'm just surprised that such an incredible person as yourself would come to such a humble store..."

"Well, there's something I need your help with."

"What may it be, sir?" The merchant shot a quick look at Efil and Ange. "I'm really sorry to say this, but I don't think our slaves are of a high enough quality to meet your standards—"

"I'm not here to buy a slave. What I want is for you to take care of the contracting procedure involved with making this girl my slave," I said, placing a hand on Ange's shoulder. "Can you do that?"

Earlier, Ange had expressed her wish to become my slave, just as Efil was. Naturally, I asked why. She had answered, "It makes me really happy that you and Efil-chan trust me so fully, but I can't expect the same from everyone in your party. For example, Hak-chan had been really wary of me this morning."

"You could tell?"

“Unlike you, Kelvin-kun, my line of work makes me pretty sensitive to that sort of thing.”

“Ugh... Hey, just saying, I’m not oblivious, I just pay attention to slightly different things than other people do!”

“If you say so...” Ange shot me a “gotcha!” look, so I averted my eyes.

Although it was true we had made up, it was still a fact that Ange had tried to assassinate me. I knew Gerard would get it, as he had been with me longer than even Efil had, but I also understood that it would be difficult for the newer faces, such as Dahak, to accept Ange on my word alone. She explained that she meant the slave contract both as a safety net and as a demonstration of her resolve to not harm me or cause me problems.

“Also, and I’m only sharing this with you and Efil-chan, but I used to be a slave too, before my reincarnation. It was a pretty bad place, and when I was a kid—nah, it’s not a fun story to tell, so I’ll abridge it. What I wanted to say is that because of my background, there was a part of me that really looked up to Efil-chan, because she looks like she’s having so much fun every day. So, make me your slave too, Kelvin.”

“Ange-san...” Efil murmured, bringing a hand to her mouth.

I can’t very well say no after she’s shared all that, now can I? “Ange, I promise I’ll cherish you.”

“Mm! Make sure you do. This body is still brand n— Nope, I didn’t say anything.”

Although I did catch the last part of what she had been about to say despite it having been almost a mumble, I decided not to pursue it. After all, it didn’t change the fact that I still had every intention of taking care of her as best I could.

“All right, let’s find ourselves a slave merchant, then.”

Along the way, I asked her for confirmation several more times, being the worrywart that I was, but her answer had remained the same. And after all that, we had finally ended up at a slave merchant’s place.

The merchant looked curiously between Ange and me several times. “A slave contract, is it? O-Of course, I can do that. But is this young lady here sure about it?”

“A hundred percent,” Ange replied. “More like, I can’t wait.”

“V-Very well...”

I could understand the merchant’s doubt, as there probably weren’t all that many people who asked to become a slave of their own free will. However, he did not question us further, likely having chalked it up to “the strange things Rank S adventurers do.”

He led us to the room where he transferred slave contracts to his

usual customers.

“Can you use this collar instead?” I asked, producing a special one from Clotho’s Storage. It was a new piece of equipment that Melfina had made for Efil, but Efil had strongly rejected it, insisting that she wanted to keep the one she had, as it was the first thing she had ever received from me. Consequently, the collar had been left forgotten inside Storage until now. Since she did not want to exchange it, I had later strengthened Efil’s collar itself.

“Um, o-of course, sir. I shall discount the cost of the collar from the price, then,” the merchant replied, timidly accepting what I was holding out. “May I have some of your blood here, Kelvin-sama—”

Just like when I’d bought Efil, the merchant asked for some of my blood on a handkerchief, then dabbed the collar that had been clasped around Ange’s neck with it. He chanted a spell and the contract was complete. Ange was officially my slave.

“Efil-chan, now we’re a match! Ehe he!”

“We are indeed, Ange-san.”

As the two girls deepened their friendship, the slave merchant sent me a strange look. Of course, I ignored him.





“So, Ange’s become my slave.”

“What do you mean ‘so,’ my king?!”

“How did *that* happen, brother?!”

I had gathered all my party members in one room to properly introduce Ange as our newest member, but Gerard and Dahak seemed strongly opposed.

What? What’s the problem?

“I knew she had joined us, my king. But even so! Even so!”

“Why’s she your slave, brother?!”

Oh, that’s what you were protesting?

I explained the sequence of events to the two men, who had gotten uncomfortably close to my face.

“Th-That’s why? I mean, I was planning to stay on my guard, just in case. But it’s not that easy to—”

“Now will you trust me, Hak-chan?” Ange asked.

“Don’t call me ‘Hak-chan’! Only people that I’ve acknowledged as being stronger than me are allowed to call me that!”

I mean, if that’s your condition, Dahak, then Ange clears it with plenty of room to spare. In the first place, you allow even little kids to call you by that name, remember?

Rion gave Dahak’s back a few pats. “Calm down, Hak-chan. She’s purposely saying that to break the ice with us. Right, An-nee?”

“An...nee?! Rion-chan, I love you so much!” Ange scooped Rion up in a huge hug. She was so happy about being called “An-nee” that she started furiously rubbing her cheek against Rion’s.

The sight seemed to have calmed Dahak down. He sighed and relaxed the tension in his shoulders. “That works, I guess. But brother, what’re you going to do when we return to Parth?”

“Indeed! What are you going to do about Parth, my king?”

“What’re you talking about?” *They make it sound like there’s a problem. What’s the problem?*

“Ange is a receptionist at the Adventurer’s Guild, isn’t she?” Dahak asked. “How’re you gonna explain things there?”

“Ah.” *That IS a problem! It’s a huge problem!*

“I can easily see rumors spreading about you having enslaved Ange to make her yours, my king. This was one bold move indeed.”

Dahak gasped. “You’re sacrificing your own reputation just to convince me, brother?! You’re just too good to me!”

Wait, hold on. Ange does have a lot of fans among the adventurers of Parth. If a rumor like that goes around, the reputation that I’ve built up will come crashing down. That’s bad. That’s very bad.

I started. “No, knowing Ange, I’m sure she already has the perfect solution in mind...right?” I looked in her direction with hope in my eyes.

“I’ve decided to quit my job at the guild and move in with all of you! I can’t keep working at the guild as a slave anyway, after all.”

“Wow! Is this what they call a felicitous resignation?! Congratulations, An-nee!”

“A felicitous what? I’ve never heard that phrase before, but I like how it sounds!”

“In other words, you’ll be with us all the time now, Ange-san? Then I really must make you a few outfits!”

Ange was already deep in conversation with the girls. *Ugh, the only thing in her head now is her new life. No, this is good. I did say I would take responsibility for her. All right, I’ll let her fans punch me until they’re satisfied!*

“Kelvin, you need some practice beforehand? I can lend you my fists,” Sera offered, starting to take Arondight out from Clotho’s Storage.

“Thank you for caring, but there are a billion other things you could do that’d be more helpful! I’ll die if I take more than a few punches from you!” *What’s the point of knocking me out before our match anyway?!*

Melfina, who had remained quiet all this time, suddenly spoke up. “Honey, this is a good opportunity. Can we ask Ange to tell us what she knows now? Ellie and the maids happen to be out at the moment, so whatever is said can stay within the party.”

“That’s a good idea. It has to be done sooner or later.” I nodded and turned to the girl in question. “Hey, Ange?”

“Yes, Kelvin-kun?”

As soon as I called out to her, Ange appeared at my side. *I don’t think I’ll ever not be impressed by her speed.*

“Sorry to bring this up out of the blue, but, uh...would you mind sharing everything you know about the Apostles and Elearis?”

“Well...I did join your side, so I guess I probably should. Okay, I’ll tell you everything.”



Two figures landed within a pure-white space. The silver-haired saint, Arbitrator, peered out from the white temple that dominated the space and saw that it was Condemner and Survivor, the two Apostles who had just left Gaun.

With her hand still on the cradle at her side, she said, “Welcome back, Condemner and Survivor. You’re just in time.”

The two new arrivals looked around.

“That’s rare, seeing all the Apostles gathered,” Condemner commented. “How many years has it been? And looks like we have a new face too.”

Survivor whistled softly. “A new face that even I don’t know!”

Standing before the temple that looked as hazy as a mirage were four men and women and two stelae. The stelae were marked with “II” and “V” in the local language.

“We’re not *all* gathered, are we? Where’s Assassin, Condemner?”

The first to respond to Bahl was a voluptuous woman with a bountiful chest. She wore a very revealing outfit and every one of her gestures seemed to ooze sultriness. When she spoke, she brushed her golden hair back sensually and shook her breasts, holding Survivor’s gaze.

Bahl turned her face to the side and clicked her tongue just softly enough that it wouldn’t be heard, then replied, “She was captured by Melfina’s Apostle during the mission.”

“Oh my!” The seductive woman pretended to gasp. “In other words, you two *abandoned* Assassin and came back like nothing happened? Oh, you break Our Lady’s heart.”

“Shut up, Reviver,” Bahl retorted. “It’s true that we left her behind, but it was my call to make as the on-site commander. Survivor had nothing to do with the decision. I assume all responsibility.”

“You’re still in the wrong. Looks like a Demon Lord really doesn’t know how to raise a daughter right.”

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me, *Seventh Seat*?”

“We’re only one apart, *Sixth Seat*. What, are you scared, Baal-chan?”

“Don’t call me by a name other than the one Our Lady granted me, you old bag.”

“Oh my, oh my! I think I just heard someone with pathetic excuses for boobs talking!”

The explosive tension between Condemner and Reviver prompted Survivor, who had been right next to the former, to take a step back. *I think this every time, but these two are like dogs and cats*, he thought. Even he, who had managed to endure the furious assault of Gerard’s group, knew better than to stand in the middle of a fight between the two women.

“You two, leave it at that. What’s the point of two Apostles being at each other’s throats?” Creator of the Third Seat admonished them, his arms crossed and eyes closed.

“That’s right. If you don’t stop, Arbitrator’s gonna get angry,” Protector of the Fourth Seat added from her perch atop the temple, cheerfully swinging her legs. “In case you don’t know, she’s reeeally scary when she gets angry!”

The two women who were about to lunge at each other at the drop of a pin immediately straightened themselves. Bahl turned around and imperceptibly lowered her head in greeting.

“Protector, and...Creator? You changed your body again?”

“Hm? Ah, you haven’t seen me in this appearance yet? It belonged to a soldier from Trycen. It’s quite easy to move around in.”

“I, for one, think it’s an amazing improvement on your last one,” Reviver interrupted. “You look so young and virile, I just want to *eat* you up.”

“Ah, you are referring to experimenting with mixing human and vampire genes? That does sound interesting, but I have something else planned in that field. You’ll have to wait until I finish it first. What’s more, a good experiment will require proper machinery. I’ll have to prepare a few things.”

“On second thought, never mind.”

Seeing everyone fall silent, Arbitrator spoke up. “Condemner and Survivor, well done drawing the attention of Goddess Melfina and her Apostle. My heart overflows with joy at your return. In regards to Assassin, it is a huge pity, but I have already disabled her Key. She may spend the rest of her life until the promised time comes, short as it is, living in the bliss she has chosen. Furthermore, I have no intention of punishing you for what happened. You did well against one such as Melfina.”

“I see.” Bahl—no, Baal’s heart quivered slightly at the realization that Arbitrator already knew that Assassin had turned to Kelvin’s side. There was no way to tell what Arbitrator was really thinking behind the saintly smile on her face. After all, as a descendant of the line of Deramisian Oracles, her madness exceeded even that of Demon Lords.

“Well then. The reason I gathered all of you here today is because the day of the resurrection of Our Lady, Elearis-sama, is almost upon —”

“Uh, I’m sorry.” A man interrupted Arbitrator as he stepped forward, raising a hand apologetically. “I don’t mean to be rude, but before you get to the main topic, may I be introduced, it being my first time here and all?”

Aside from Arbitrator, the only people who knew the man in a dramatic feathered hat and garish military uniform were Creator and Assassin, the latter of whom was no longer present.

“I had planned on doing so afterwards, but very well. Everyone, this is the latest addition to the Apostles. He is Controller of the Tenth Seat.”

“Thank you for the introduction. As Arbitrator said, I am Controller. My power is Summoning. It is an incredible honor to be here.” He bowed elegantly, as a noble would.

But Baal could only see it as a performance. If she were to rely on her instincts—which she always did—this man could not be trusted. *That half smirk of his really rubs me the wrong way. He's probably just as malicious and blackhearted as Reviver.*

Reviver was sizing up the newcomer as well. *His looks aren't bad, but he's not really my type. Looks like the kind who's interested in little girls. Maybe he'd make a good pair with Condemner? I suppose the best one is still Fifth Seat—that mature, gentlemanly aura always makes my heart skip a beat.*

Condemner's and Reviver's first impressions of Controller were equally disparaging.

"So this old man finally has a junior! I'm so touched."

Baal shot Survivor a look. "Be quiet. Let Arbitrator speak."

"Now, now, if you get too hissy, it'll be a waste of that cute face of yo— Sorry, not another word."

"Glad to hear it." Baal slowly lowered the foot she had raised high above Survivor's head.

Protector giggled at the exchange from her position higher up, then clapped her hands to gather everyone's attention. "Okay, that's enough. Controller, your mission will be explained to you at a different time. Let's get back to the main topic of the day."

"Finally," said one of the stelae. "Time is money. Please make this quick."

"I agree," said the other stela. "I've got quite a lot of things going on where I'm at too. Though I do feel sorry for hurrying the proceedings when I can only show up remotely like this..."

The voices coming from both stelae had sounded similarly mechanical and robotic, leaving no clue as to the identity of the speakers from beyond.

"Hey, why the hurry? It's been a while since we got everyone here. How about we get to know each other—"

Arbitrator cut Survivor off. "Despite their busy schedules, both Selector and Analyzer have made time to join us, albeit through the stelae. Let us begin immediately." She raised a hand, and black light gathered on top of her palm until it formed a black book.

"Let us talk about the final part of the process for summoning Elearis-sama's soul to the current age."



"The aim of the Apostles is to resurrect Our L— I mean, Elearis as a goddess," Ange explained frankly. "To be more exact, this involves summoning her not simply as a target of worship but as a full-fledged deity of this world. Then they plan on usurping the seat of Goddess of Reincarnation from Mel-san."

This is pretty much in line with what I'd guessed, but now that it's confirmed, the scale of it just blows me away. Ange said the main culprit is Colette's ancestor, Iris Deramilius. I mean, even if the ruling goddess changes, the Oracle of Deramis wouldn't go so far as to— Actually, no, I actually can imagine Colette doing something like this. It's not a matter of can or can't; if it's for Melfina's sake, she would do anything it took. Religious fanatics are terrifying.

I raised a hand. "By 'full-fledged deity' do you mean they plan on summoning her as she is without using an artificial body? Like I would Summon Melfina with her heavenly body?"

Even after Evolving to daemon, I still don't have enough MP to do that. These gods and goddesses and whatnot have terrible gas mileage.

"Aha ha, truth is, Arbitrator was going to tell us the details of the final part of the Plan right before the resurrection. And I'm now *here* instead of *there*, so..."

"Huh?!"

"Sorryyyy! All I know is how they plan on supplying the energy for the ritual!"

What terrible timing. Or could it be their Oracle foresaw Ange switching to our side?

Ange crossed her arms and groaned cutely as she racked her brain. "I mean, Arbitrator is more or less doting on this cradle, but there's nothing actually inside it. An Oracle of Deramis might do something that strange for no reason, but it's probably not unrelated...I think?"

Doting? On an empty cradle? Hmm... I guess... Hmmm... Even taking into account that this is an Oracle of Deramis, it might still be important information. Let's at least make note of it. Just in case.

"Honey, even if Elearis is resurrected and I'm killed as I am right now, she still cannot become the Goddess of Reincarnation. At the end of the day, this is an artificial body, and my real heavenly body is in another dimension. Reaching it is much harder than killing me in my artificial body. Do they have something else up their sleeve? Ange, does Iris really possess the power of reincarnation?"

"Apparently Elearis gave Iris a portion of her power. I have no idea how it happened, but I myself was reincarnated, so I've never doubted it."

"I...see..." Melfina replied. "Then she really did manage to pass her power along the instant she vanished..."

It's rare to see Melfina so worried about something that she clutches her head, but with the problem at hand, there's not much we can do. For what it's worth, Mel, have my dessert. Get some sugar for your brain— Oh, it's already gone.

"I do remember hearing that Arbitrator's power is imperfect,"

Ange offered. "Something about how she has to wait years between each use of it and only being able to reincarnate the same soul once. Protector told me that while we were chitchatting."

Uh, that sounds like important information being leaked as "chitchat" there!

"By the way, Mel, what is the power capable of at maximum strength?"

"I'm sorry, honey. Divine Binding won't let me say."

"I see."

"Oh, is that the restriction on your artificial body?" Ange cut in. "I can say it, then. The perfect power has no restrictions, like, at all! It can be used as much as she wants! Or at least, that's what Protector told me. In another chitchat session."

"Uh..." All this information the deities consider confidential enough to seal with Divine Binding is leaking like a broken tap in all these "chitchats" with this Protector person. Look, Melfina-sensei is clutching her head even harder. Here, have more sweets.

"And, uh, Gerard-san, I'm afraid there's something I have to tell you. You might not like it."

"Hm?" Gerard pointed at himself. "Me?"

"Mm-hm." Ange nodded awkwardly. "So, you know how you guys were in Trycen trying to take down the Demon Lord, right? At the time, Arbitrator sent me on a mission with Creator. Does 'Jildora, the dwarf riding a giant golem' ring any bells?"

Barely suppressed hostility burst from Gerard's entire being.

"Gerard," I said just in case.

"I know, my king."

Ange continued, "I was the one who saved Jildora from Blue Rage, the golem that you and the others destroyed, Gerard-san. I did it using my Unique Skill, Uncontainable, which enables me to phase through anything I want."

"Hold on a damn minute!" Dahak exclaimed. "Even if you managed to get him out, I'm sure I infected him with a super potent poison. I completely filled the inside of the golem with it! There's no way he survived!"

"Mm-hm, the dwarven body he was using at the time did die. But Jildora used his Unique Skill, Eternal Return, to adopt another body right beforehand. Umm...I'm kind of getting into my dark past now. I'm sorry if this repulses you, but I'll share what happened that day through the Network."

Footage was suddenly uploaded to the Follower Network. It was from the perspective of someone who was massacring an entire group of knights with daggers—presumably Ange.

"All of you were kind enough to accept me as I am. So I, uh...I

want to be honest about my past and what I've done."

The scene in the video changed to a room where a man wearing what appeared to be armor belonging to Trycen's Steel Knight Order was captured. Then a dwarf came into view, grabbed his head, and collapsed.

I see, so that's what happened.

"This man was Jin D'Alba, lieutenant general of the Steel Knight Order and son of General Dan D'Alba. This is Jildora's new appearance."

I do remember General Dan saying that his son had gone missing after the Demon Lord fight.

"So Jildora is still alive," Gerard growled. "Talk about being tenacious!"

"I'm sorry..." Ange said in a small voice.

"There's no need to apologize to me, lass. All is as my king decides. Here, catch!"

Gerard pushed Ange towards me, and I accepted her into my arms. She peered at me with a slightly downcast face filled with unease, tears in her eyes.

"I...also did a lot of other things. Things that taint my hands red with blood. Sometimes, I even enjoyed it. A-Are you disappointed in me now, Kelvin?"

"Have you ever killed anyone outside of the missions given to you by Arbitrator?" I asked. "For your own pleasure or because you got emotional?"

"I...have, just once. Back when I was a slave, I killed my enslaver and his lackey. I think that's it."

"That doesn't count. If you didn't do it, I might very well have done it for you. Although you're not entirely innocent, you *can* live the rest of this life making up for what you did. And just saying, I wouldn't let go of you because of something like that. You showed me your resolve, even going so far as to become my slave. That's more than enough for me."

"Thank you... Thank you!"

I wiped her tears away. I was a battle junkie too, after all. It wasn't as if I was proud of it, but I was at least aware that I had a tendency to go quite far for the sake of my own enjoyment. I couldn't lecture Ange as if I were any better, but I could walk the same path with her going forward.

And that's enough, isn't it? Honestly, though, I feel like Ange has already done more than enough to atone for her past. She can stop apologizing, really.

I kept her in my arms until she calmed down. After a while, she returned to her seat and continued her story.

“We had two objectives. The first was to help Jildora—who had been living in Trycen—to escape. Arbitrator—to be more exact, it was Selector, but that’s splitting hairs—had predicted the Demon Lord would appear in Trycen. This was why Jildora was dispatched ahead of time: to make this Demon Lord as powerful as possible.”

Sera frowned in confusion. “What for?”

“It ties into our second objective: to retrieve the Black Grimoire from King Zel’s private study. According to Arbitrator, it is how Elearis will obtain the energy needed for her resurrection. The Black Grimoire was planted in the castle long before I became an Apostle. The moment the book gets its energy”—Ange suddenly produced a small knife and jabbed it forward lightly—“is when life ends. The more powerful the being that dies, the higher quality *and* quantity the mana the Black Grimoire receives. When coming from a Demon Lord, the mana is simply off the charts. And of course, it was convenient that there was an all-out battle happening throughout the city. I’ve heard the Apostles have been manipulating things from the shadows since before the Great War, but this one day alone pushed the progress for Elearis’s resurrection forward so much that they’re just one last step away from being done.”

“So the very act of us killing the Demon Lord contributed to her resurrection...” I murmured.

“You serious?” Dahak clapped a hand over his eyes as Gerard groaned thoughtfully.

Uh-oh, the atmosphere’s turned really heavy.

“It might be strange coming from me,” Ange said, “but all of you did the right thing; there’s no doubt about it. Don’t regret your choice—be proud of it. If you hadn’t killed the Demon Lord, more innocent lives would have been lost.”

I suppose that’s true. And when Elearis is resurrected, I’ll not only get to fight a goddess, I’ll be justified in doing so. If I think about the situation like that, the future seems pretty bright.

“Ange, is that Black Grimoire a magic item from the Age of the Gods?” Melfina asked. “Even I’ve never heard of something that can send energy to a being who’s lost their form.”

“Sorry, I’m not actually that knowledgeable about them. Oh, right, ‘them,’ because Arbitrator had quite a few with her.”

“I see. That’s a pity...”

Seeing how down Melfina looked, I gently pushed more snacks her way—*Huh?! They’re all gone!* In any case, the fact that Arbitrator possessed multiple Black Grimoires meant she had planted them not only in Trycen but in various places all over the world.

“Oh, right! Speaking of magic items, uh... Right, here it is. We Apostles have a base—I guess you can call it a base?—a place where

we gather. You can't just walk in, though. To get in..." Ange held out a white key. "You'd need a Holy Key. If you imbue it with mana somewhere in the vicinity of Crux Bridge, the super long bridge connecting the two continents, it'd teleport you there."

Dahak leaped to his feet, eyes burning with motivation. "Which means we can go raid the Apostles' hideout straight away!"

"Aha ha, that's the first thing you think of, Hak-chan? But I'm sorry, this Holy Key's connection has already been cut. Now it's just a key-shaped accessory."

"Whaaat?!"

In other words, Arbitrator already cut Ange off. Seriously, it feels like she foresaw this development coming from a mile away.

"This key used to have another function. As long as I wasn't in a place that blocked the use of magic, I could use it to talk to anyone else who had one or those at our base through a Holy Stela. I guess it's kind of similar to this Network you guys have through Clo-chan."

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. "So you can basically talk through it as long as you can get a signal. Sounds just like a phone. An enemy that can transfer information so quickly is formidable."

"Looks like this world's phones are pretty advanced too!" Rion nodded.

Everyone else looked confused. *As expected, only Rion understood what I was talking about.*

"Lastly, I'll share what I know about each of the Apostles."

"Please and thank you."

"First of all, their numbers: there are eight or nine of them now."

Just like when she talked about this yesterday, we're not getting a straight number. I'd chalked it up to her fragile mental state at the time, but looks like that wasn't it.

Rion raised a hand. "Question, An-nee! Why is the number unclear?"

"That's a good question, Rion-chan! As a reward, you get a hug!" Ange easily sneaked behind Rion and enveloped her in a hug, taking the opportunity to also tickle her sides.

"Ah! Aha ha ha! That tickles, that tick— You're tickling me, An-nee!"

Ahh, Ange's definitely the kind of older sister who will never grow out of doting on her younger sister. But still, where'd the heavy air from just now go? I mean, it's not that I mind—a cheerful face is always better than a grave one.

"Recharging your little sister meter is great and all, but can you continue please?"

"Aha ha, I couldn't help myself..." Despite looking abashed, Ange still picked Rion up and placed her on her lap so that she could

continue rubbing her head. Rion pouted a little at being treated like a child, but the look on her face showed that she was actually enjoying the attention.

Ange cleared her throat. "Ahem. Right, the number of Apostles. To explain, back when I was an Apostle, there were nine of us. With me gone, the number should go down to eight, right?"

Pretty hard to get such a simple subtraction problem wrong, yep.

"But I heard that Arbitrator was planning on reincarnating a new Apostle. Schedule-wise, I think she's probably succeeded by now. That's why there are eight of them, but possibly nine. And the identity of that new Apostle—"

"Tristan, right?" I interrupted with a sigh.

"What?! Th-That's correct! How'd you know?"

"He was clearly already connected to you guys somehow when we encountered him in Trycen. If you ask me who I think would be the most trouble as an Apostle from the people I know, it'd be him, hands down."

Clive was another candidate I had considered, but I wasn't sure what had happened to his soul after being turned into the monster Sera had fought and then further transforming into a sword that was fused with Zel. With Iris's power being imperfect, I wasn't sure he was even viable as a target anymore. And of course, Clive wasn't all that capable as a person either.

"That makes sense. Okay, starting from the top, I'll go over the names and ranking order of the Apost— Hold on, I heard the stairs outside creak."

Sera looked up. "Someone's coming. It's...Ellie and Ruka."

Both Ange's and Sera's detection abilities had picked up our two maids. I only realized then that it was about time for their return. Sure enough, a few moments later, I heard their footsteps approaching from the corridor outside.

Knock, knock.

"Master, we have returned."

"We're back!"

Just as Sera said, it was Ellie and Ruka. Both of them held paper bags in their hands, indicating that they had gone shopping. Judging from Melfina's lack of reaction, the contents were not food.

"Welcome back," I said. "How were things outside?"

"There were so many people near the arena!" Ruka replied cheerfully.

The beastkin are still milling around there? They sure like their commotions.

Ellie added, "And Master, you have a guest waiting for you downstairs. He appears to be a Gaunian envoy."

Oh, that's *what I'd forgotten*.



"Sorry about dropping by this late, Kelvin. My old man insisted."

"Don't worry about it. It's my fault for forgetting about his invitation in the first place."

When I followed Ellie down to the first floor of the inn, I found Sabato waiting for me. When I heard "Gaunian envoy," all the trouble that I had caused came to mind and I had braced myself, but seeing a familiar face did reassure me a little. Of course, regardless of who came, it didn't change the fact that it was still the Beast King I would be meeting at the end. It's just that this was more preferable in terms of starting on the right foot.

::Do you think we're being summoned because we're in trouble for destroying the coliseum, Kel-nii?::

I mean, he summoned me before all that happened. Who knows, maybe this is for something else entirely. At least, I really hope so.

::I believe it would be more constructive to face reality, Master::

Sabato was currently leading our group through the Castle of the Divine Spirit Tree. It would raise a huge fuss if my entire party were to show up at once, so it was only me, Efil, Rion (with Alex in her shadow), and Ange. Everyone else had returned to my magic pool.

::Aha ha, I got a bit too excited when I saw Kelvin's face in the arena,:: Ange admitted. ::Um...sorry. And I think Condemner couldn't afford to hold back either, not when facing Mel-san::

To be fair, Ange hadn't caused all that much property damage. Although she and I did kind of lose ourselves in our fight, it was really the breath attacks from the dragons that had dealt the final blow. And of course, I was the one who had ordered it.

Sabato shot us a look. "Why do all of you look so worried?"

"Nah, you're imagining it. Ha ha ha... Right?"

Rion started when she noticed me looking her way. "Huh? Oh, uh, yeah! We're fine!"

"Both of you look like you got ants in your pants."

Curse you, Sabato! Rion followed up my monotone delivery with the most natural gloss ever but you went and wasted it! Guh, looks like even Sabato is growing. What an unexpected surprise!

"Hey, you're thinking something really rude about me right now, aren't you?"

"Haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"Stop it with the monotone lines. Sheesh, our country's in a big ol' mess from such a huge incident and you're still the same as usual."

Huh? It's that big an incident?

::Master, not only was the entire coliseum destroyed, a whole

crowd of people were controlled through mass hypnotism. I do believe that counts as a huge incident.: Efil's face turned red. ::And embarrassingly enough, I failed to hold back in my fight as well....:

Ah, so the torn-up pavement and the blown-up houses that I saw on the way back... Hold on, so we're entirely in the wrong here?! Ah, fine! I'll rebuild every last building!

"More importantly, that collar around Ange's neck..." Sabato gave me a sideways glance. "She became your slave?"

"Well asked!" Ange interrupted. "That's right! I'm now Kelvin's property! Ehe he..."

What is with your knack for asking all the "right" questions today, Sabato?

"Kelvin, man..."

Stop it! I had braced myself for this, but still, don't look at me with those eyes!

Sabato sighed. "I mean, it's not like *I* have a problem with this. But there are a lot of people in Gaun who really dislike the whole slave system. Criminal slaves are one thing, but just...watch out, all right? Even if it was to make a popular guild receptionist your woman, using a method like this... Man..."

"I'm gonna clear the record right here and now: I *didn't* do whatever you think I did! I can swear up and down that you got every part of what happened wrong!"

If anything, it's more like a story of the realization of a love of many years. In other words, it's a pure romance.

"I know, I know. Ange looks happy, and I guess that's all that matters. All right, we're here."

After giving me a wry look, he pushed open the large door before us.

He probably still has it wrong. I don't want this to cause any trouble down the road, so I really have to explain this to him proper— "Whoa, this place is huge."

The room—no, hall—that Sabato had led us into stretched back quite a ways and was dimly lit. It was a royal audience hall, a king's seat of power. All the walls were bark—as befit a place inside the Divine Spirit Tree—and decorated with giant fangs and hide that appeared to be monster-hunting trophies. And of course, with this being a royal audience hall, it had a throne. And the throne was, of course, occupied.

"Old man, here's Kelvin and the others."

"Your voice is too loud, Sabato. I told you to bring them in secrecy, did I not?"

At the back of the room was a grand throne. At its side stood Jereol, Yujil, and Goma in a line.

Hm? My comrade, Kilto, is absent. And here I was hoping to talk with him more than we had time to during that dinner party.

“Have you heard all the ruckus outside? It’s fine, don’t sweat it, old man. Kelvin, come on up.”

“Hey there. Feels like it’s been ages since yesterday, huh? Looks like you’ve got a pretty big incident on your ha— Uh, you’re Beast King Leonhart, right?”

I was approaching the throne, mixing my greetings up with a bit of a jab, when I laid eyes on Leonhart’s appearance and stopped dead in my tracks. Why? Because he was not in the appearance of a woman.

“Ha ha ha! Now *that’s* the face I wanted to see during our match!”

“Is that...your real appearance? It’s very...” I paused and looked over at Jereol to confirm that he was actually there. He was. In other words, Leonhart’s current appearance really was how he actually looked. “You look very young, Your Majesty.”

“HA HA HA! So I do! So I do!” The king roared with laughter, even though the bandages wrapped around his body indicated that he had yet to recover fully from the injuries I had inflicted on him yesterday.

What had taken me by such surprise was how much Beast King Leonhart looked like his son, Jereol. With his magnificent mane, he looked very much like a lion. I did manage to spot signs of him being older when I got a better look, but they only appeared to be about ten years apart. It seemed more correct to call them brothers rather than parent and child.

Sabato leaned over to whisper in my ear. “Honestly, it’s been years since *I’ve* seen my old man’s real face. Even I thought he was Jereol. To be blunt, it’s been so long that I’d completely forgotten what he looked like.”

“So it’s not just my eyes playing tricks on me,” I replied in an equally low whisper. “Not that it means anything, but still...whew.”

And also, seeing Leonhart in a good mood scares me.

“The match yesterday was such fun! But based on your reaction, I take it you don’t know about how Evolution changes your life span?”

“Our life span...changes?”

“Indeed. You have your Status Concealed, but I could tell from fighting you—you’ve Evolved from human into something more, haven’t you? I must confess, I did not expect you to achieve it before Sylvia. And Dahak turned out to be an entirely different race altogether...”

I guess Sera gets a free pass despite being a demon because she looks even more human than Prettia does?

“And how does that relate to our life spans?”

“So you truly don’t know. We humanoid races, such as humans, beastkin, elves, and dwarves, do not Evolve easily. In exchange, the chosen few who do gain enormous benefits. One of those benefits is an extension of their life spans. In short, we gain something similar to eternal youth.”

“What...” *M-Melfina-sensei! Is what he’s saying true?!*

::Yes, it is::

It is?!

::To be more exact, it is an extension of your life span. You don’t become completely immortal. It’s just that your life span, which used to be that of a normal human, is now closer to that of an elf. And someone who’s originally an elf would live that much longer. Your body still does age, albeit extremely slowly::

::Which means I can spend that many more years with Master?!::

Don’t cry, Efil! You’ll make me cry too!

::E-Efil-nee! I’m really shocked too, but hold it in!::

::Don’t worry, Efil-chan! After being reincarnated, I have a really long life span too! I’ll also be with you forever!::

I took a deep breath to calm myself down. *Calm. I am calm. Suddenly having the fact that I’m no longer human thrust into my face took me by surprise, but I’m calm. Phewwww. Giving Efil a big hug! Giving Rion a big hug! Giving Ange a big hug! Okay, I’m good now.*

Seeing me turn back his way, Leonhart asked, “Are you done?”

“Mm. Sorry about that. I’ve calmed back down.”

I had never imagined I’d be hugging my girls in front of a king. However, I did not regret it. I had merely done what I wanted to do.

::Kelvin, me too! Me too!::

After we get back, Sera.

“So then, you Evolved from beastkin and your age no longer matches your appearance?”

“Indeed. I’ve been alive since the Great War. Partly due to me participating in numerous battles everywhere, I Evolved when I was around Jereol’s age. A lot happened, and here we are. Well, I only assumed this throne a decade or so ago.”

So he’s actually centuries old. I do remember him mentioning the Great War during our match in the tournament. Something about Gaun being in a terrible state at the time. Is it because he survived those times that he’s now going full Spartan in raising his children?

“You look like you have something to say.”

“You can tell?”

“Pretty much. I suppose I did mention it myself before. The phrase ‘like throwing a lion cub off a cliff’ is commonly used here in Gaun to describe trials for testing someone’s mettle. In my case, I throw a boulder as a follow-up and kick my children back down again after

they claw their way up.”

Talk about ruthless... “What’s the point in doing all that?”

“It’s not as if I want them to become like me. In fact, if they did, this country would likely perish. There is a need for a straightforward man like Sabato sometimes. He is the kind of person others *want* to follow.”

Sabato’s eyes flew wide open. “I-I was praised?! By my old man?!” he exclaimed, as Goma covered her eyes and moaned, “Oh goddess, looks like it’s going to rain spears tomorrow.”

Leonhart, look at how unsettled you’ve made your children.

“All I want from them is a little intelligence and the ability to think outside the box. We beastkin are not entirely brainless, and we know to be wary when occasion calls for it. However, our straightforward nature makes it easy for us to forget ourselves when the blood rushes to our heads. That is why I have no recourse but to repeatedly brand the lessons into their hearts and minds. All to raise their chances of survival and success by the slightest increment no matter the situation.”

“I...am not sure I share your view.” But if this is just how they do things here in Gaun, it’s not my place to comment.

“But hey, it is a fact that the number of beastkin who can use magic like Kilto has gone up since my old man became king,” Sabato said. “And our military strategies are no longer just charging in head-on. The rule here in Gaun is: those who want these changes revoked must take my old man down. There’s always a whole line of contenders challenging him.”

“And yet he still occupies the throne,” Goma added. “That means there has been no beastkin so far capable of surpassing him either in physical prowess or strategy.”

“Before the actual fight starts, he fights you in a whole other way.” Jereol sighed.

Looks like they all have experience challenging Leonhart. If I know him, he probably used underhanded methods to throw his opponents off their game. I really wish he’d just stuck to the straightforward battle. Not that I have any interest in the Beast King throne in the first place.

“There are many situations where our wild instincts manifest easily. For example, we tend to be rather susceptible to temptations of the intimate nature. Honey trapping can prove quite effective in causing trouble among those of our race. Isn’t that right, Yujil? What country did your first love come from again?”

“F-Father, please spare me already...”

I had no intention of prying, but the context of the conversation indicated that Yujil had probably fallen victim to a plot of that nature, with the other side being Trycen or some other country. As such, the

Beast King was closely involved with his children's sexual education. *Sounds tough, but all I can say is keep working at it. I know I am.*

"If we're talking honey traps—I imagine Prince Jereol is fine, having a wife and all—wouldn't Prince Kילו be particularly susceptible?" I looked around. "Speaking of which, where is he?"

I can imagine him following a little child without thinking as soon as she said "Big brother!" and gave him one big smile.

"Ah, Kילו's cooped up in his research lab at the moment," Yujil answered. "He said he's devoting himself to making a set of equipment that can best draw out all of Goma's strength."

Prince Kילו, you care about Goma that much?

Leonhart chuckled, smiling at me conspiratorially. "You would think so, but he's actually rather resistant to that form of enticement in his own way. His love for Goma is greater than anyone else's by a half. So I'm actually not worried about him on that front. And, depending on his achievements, I could be open to the idea of allowing him to wed G—"

"NO thank you!" Goma interrupted firmly. "That's enough joking, father!"

My comrade, be the gentleman you are. I will always support you.

"Well then, that's enough of the stiff and formal talk," Leonhart said, changing the topic. "It's about time to move on to the main reason I asked for you. As I'm sure you already know, someone destroyed the coliseum that's the pride and joy of our country along with many of the surrounding houses. As everyone in the vicinity, including residents and soldiers, was hypnotized, there were no witnesses. I hurried over when I heard the sound of the arena crashing down, but everything had finished by the time I arrived. Unfortunately, with my injuries, my response time ended up being quite slow."

"Uh...hey, how about I rebuild the coliseum for you with magic? I can make it look exactly the same if you give me the blueprints! And one of my companions is great at building houses!"

"I couldn't ask for better. Are you sure you—"

I waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, don't worry about it! I'm offering because I want to do it!"

I wouldn't bet against him knowing the truth, no matter what he said. He's Leonhart, after all. This way, I can at least keep the credit of having offered to help with the reconstruction before being asked. A lot of it was our fault, and the residents are mere victims in all this. In fact, I'd feel bad not doing anything. So sorry, Gaunians!

"Thank you, Kelvin. We are currently still investigating what happened. However, with the situation being what it is, I'm afraid it's quite impossible to continue the Beast King Festival. The third place

and final matches have been called off, and the Naming Ceremony will be carried out in a courtyard of the royal palace tomorrow.”

“Canceled...” *It makes sense, but still, it’s a shame. I was looking forward to the chance to make up for all the times I’ve lost to Sera before. I guess I’ll just invite her to a match once we get home.*

“Of course, we will award you the monetary prize that goes to the champion, Kelvin. After all, the champion would have been you or your companion. So rest easy.”

“That works for me, but...judging from the state of things out there, looks to me like you’ll have an uphill battle convincing your citizens to accept the outcome.”

Jereol sighed heavily. “We plan on opening the parts of the palace leading to the ceremony venue to the public tomorrow, but you’re right in that it’s probably impossible to satisfy them entirely.”

He looks like the member of the family who’ll get white hair first, and not just because of his age. Hang in there, man.

“During the Naming Ceremony, aside from granting you your family name, we will also be commending you for defeating the Demon Lord in Trycen,” Leonhart said. “Sorry it took this long, but we have finally gathered the bounty from each country and the Adventurer’s Guild. Look forward to it. And that is everything I wanted to inform you of today.”

A bounty... Honestly, we’re not particularly strapped for cash, but hey, we’ll take what we can get.

Afterwards, the detailed itinerary of the Naming Ceremony was explained to us, and then we were dismissed. When we turned to actually leave, however, Leonhart suddenly spoke up with a smile laden with meaning.

“Oh, right. Turns out, we do actually have one spare stage left. It just so happened to be in one of the courtyards here in the palace for safekeeping. Maybe we will have one last exhibition match after all.”



After we got home, we had a lengthy discussion of the life span matter but eventually settled on “let’s first focus on the Apostles.” It would be putting the cart before the horse to get killed while worrying about a prolonged life span. I agreed that was the right place to leave the topic. Honestly, the scale of it was simply too massive for me to comprehend at the moment.

My companions and I were now in a VIP room in the palace, waiting to be fetched for the Naming Ceremony. Since this was one of the rare times we were to appear in public as part of an official function, we decided to show up in the formal wear that the Adventurer’s Guild had designed for us back during my Rank S

promotion ceremony. After all, we almost never had occasion to wear such fancy clothes—might as well take the opportunity when it came along.

“I thought this during Master’s promotion ceremony as well, but...such a glamorous dress really doesn’t suit me.”

“There you go again, Efil-nee. You really should be more aware of how pretty you are! Try wearing outfits other than the maid uniform like Sera-nee does! I’m sure all of them would look great on you!”

“Since Colette isn’t around today and I don’t have to worry about being caught by her, I’ll be showing off this dress to my heart’s content!” Melfina gushed.

“I feel like my dress has gotten a bit tight around my chest...” Sera murmured.

Ange nodded with satisfaction upon seeing all of us in our outfits. “You look wonderful!” she exclaimed.

I was wearing a black suit, while Efil, Rion, Melfina, and Sera were wearing green, white, blue, and red dresses, respectively. All of our outfits bore the white wings of the Parth Adventurer’s Guild.

Ange was in her usual guild uniform, as she was technically still employed by them. She had a blue scarf wrapped around her neck to hide her slave collar. The plan was to officially resign once she returned to Parth, and I would naturally be accompanying her at the time.

When I imagine the hell that will be waiting...I’m gonna have to brace myself.

“C’mon, Kelvin! What’s that dark look for on an auspicious day like this?”

“I’m just not good at being in the center of attention like this. I was like this back at the promotion ceremony too. Do *you* not get nervous, Ange?”

“Says the person who went on a huge rampage at the Beast King Festival! How about taking a page from Gerard-san?”

“Gerard?” My eyes looked towards where Ange was pointing.

“GA HA HA HA! I look dashing, do I not?!” my knight companion crowed, fluttering his white cape in an exaggerated manner. “This is the special one I use for ceremonies!”

“The embroidery looks so beautiful!” Ruka exclaimed admiringly as Shutola studied him with an appreciative eye. “Your usual red one is wonderful too, but the white does contrast well with your black armor.”

With Gerard’s armor making him look like a Demon Lord, I thought his prancing around made him seem more like someone people would call the cops on, but I could tell at a glance that he was greatly enjoying himself. Thanks to Self-Modification turning into Self-

Transcendence, he could now swap out what he wore at will. The only thing on his mind was impressing his grandchildren with how gallant he looked.

“See?” Ange said. “Try being confident like him.”

“To think the day would come when I’m taking Gerard as a role model...”

“Don’t worry, you look super stylish too, Kelvin!” Ange slapped my back a few more times to pump some motivation into me.

But still, when everyone’s standing around in formal wear, it makes me want to see Ange in a dress too. I should ask Efil to make one for her sometime. Ah, but then we’d need a suit for Dahak too. Uh...I honestly can’t imagine how he would look in a formal outfit. Speaking of which, he’s currently off grabbing seats for us as a pretext for going to see Prettia in her dress, right? That dragon sure stays true to his character.

“Kelvin-sama, it is about time. Please follow me to the courtyard.”

Ah, here’s the beastkin servant. All right, let’s go, then.

“Break a leg out there!” Ange waved at us as we headed out.



“SILENCE!” Jereol said in a firm and authoritative voice on the fancy stage. “The Naming Ceremony will now begin!”

The courtyard within the Castle of the Divine Spirit Tree was overflowing with people. It was almost as if everyone who was supposed to sit in the coliseum had been packed inside this space. Actually, scratch that. Everyone from the coliseum definitely *was* here.

::This courtyard is indeed spacious, but there are simply far too many people in attendance,:: Melfina agreed.

The courtyard was located about halfway up the Divine Tree where a gigantic branch sprouted. It made me laugh a little seeing other species of trees planted as decoration despite this place being literally on top of a tree itself. The spectators were allowed to come halfway into the space, all the way up to where Gaunian soldiers were standing behind stanchions. Only relevant personnel were allowed on the other side. When we left the crowd and stepped through, we suddenly realized just how vast the area was.

Beside a certain something smack-dab in the middle of the venue that looked conspicuously out of place was a row of people wearing noble attire who were likely also there to take on their families’ last names. As we were considered “relevant personnel,” there were seats reserved for us at the end of the row.

“Congratulations, Sabato, Goma,” I said, turning to my side. “The fact that you’re here means both of you got permission to adopt the Gaun family name, right?”

Sabato grinned broadly and gave me a thumbs-up. “You bet! Even

I couldn't believe it when I was told the news. Looks like this isn't just a dream!"

"Sabato, shush!" Goma hissed, bringing a finger to her lips. "If you really have to talk, at least do it in a quiet voice. The ceremony is starting soon."

The royal siblings were sitting next to us. The pair talked about how confused they were by this arrangement, but it turns out the Beast King had properly acknowledged the strength that they had displayed during the tournament. Judging from results alone, they hadn't technically achieved much seeing as they had dropped out in the second round. However, they had been up against Rion and Prettia, opponents whom even the other princes, who had already received the Gaunian name, would not be able to defeat. As such, they had been evaluated based on their efforts up to the second round and found worthy.

"We will now begin granting new family names! When your name is called, come onto the stage."

Jereol called out a name, and the beastkin at the farthest end of the row of seats got up and climbed onto the stage. An old man in formal wear approached him and mumbled what looked like a spell.

So that's how Naming is done. If I remember right, assigning family names can only be performed with the Naming skill at Rank A or higher. It makes sense for someone to focus on raising only one skill throughout their lives, but we're currently in Gaun. For all I know, that elderly beastkin might have been some famous swordsman on the battlefield in the past as well.

::Kel-nii, it looks like Jereol is calling people up according to their position on the row::

If that's the case, since we're on the far end, it means we'll be the last to go.

I looked around restlessly, thinking, *For events like these, I always prefer going first so I can be done with it and just relax. Now I have to deal with my nerves till the end of the ceremony. Why couldn't they make Sabato go last? He's royalty, so they should have ended on a high note with him, right? Oh right, let's chat using telepathy to take my mind off my nerves. Good idea.*



"Next, Rank S adventurer 'Grim Reaper' Kelvin, 'Black Meteor' Rion, 'Empress' Sera, 'The Smile' Mel, 'Bombing Princess' Efil, and 'Sword Guru' Gerard! To the front!"

Time had flown by as we internally chatted up a storm, and it was our turn before I knew it.

C'mon, the discussion "how to make Bahl turn honest and call Sera

‘big sister’” was just getting underway! Oh well, there’s no point wailing about it.

We hit pause on the conference and I stood up with Rion before making my way to the stage. The two of us were the only ones receiving the family name. In light of their contribution to taking down the Demon Lord, Sera and the rest could have submitted requests too, but that was for me to work on down the line.

The old man looked down at the application that Ange had submitted for us, then proclaimed, “Kelvin and Rion, I bestow upon you the family name of ‘Celsius.’”

When he began chanting his spell, my Status window popped up on its own and the area to the right of my name started glowing. Eventually, the light took on the shape of letters, and when it faded, the word “Celsius” remained. I looked over, and it seemed like the same thing was happening to Rion too. With this, we were now Kelvin Celsius and Rion Celsius.

“Congratulations, Kelvin,” Jereol said. “I am sure the Celsius name will soon shake the whole world.”

“Thank you, Prince Jereol,” I replied.

Jereol turned back towards the audience. “Now then! This would normally be where the ceremony ends. Not the case today, though! We are now moving on to the conferral of the monetary rewards, awards, and titles granted to Kelvin by various countries for defeating the Demon Lord. You, bring it over.”

Wheels rattled loudly in the hushed silence as a cart was pushed in from the side of the stage.

“Uh...are you sure this isn’t too much?”

“It includes the amount that would have gone to the Hero who fought with you. But he’s already returned to his own world, correct? It only makes sense for you, his comrade in arms, to receive it on his behalf. What’s more, the reward for being champion and runner-up of this year’s Beast King Festival is also included.”

When the cart came into view, I saw that it was laden with a whole pile of gold coins. The scene was so ridiculous that it looked like something taken straight out of a manga or movie. The amount was probably enough to buy my mansion many times over.

“Next are the awards. From Gaun, this is the highest honor we can confer: the Beast King Medal. From Deramis, the Pope Medal and the Saint Medal. From Toraj, this is the Tsubaki Blossom Award. All of them are the most prestigious awards each country has to offer. And last but not least, Trycen has sent their Military King Award.”

“I am truly honored. That’s what I should say, right?”

Man, awards. I know these are meant to be distinctions to signify honor, but I honestly have no idea what I’m to do with them. Am I

supposed to pin them to my chest or something?

“Last of all, peerage. I am aware that adventurers have a tendency to be averse to such offers. However, the Queen of Toraj insisted. You are hereby appointed Captain of the Tsubaki Gua—”

“Oh, I’m good, thanks. No, thank you.” *In the first place, that’s probably not even a peerage.*

“I’d thought you would respond that way. She never learns, does she? So, will you need our help delivering this reward to your house in Parth?”

“Thank you for the offer, but I’ve got it.”

I instructed Clotho, who was hiding in my robe, to extend a tentacle and suck all the gold coins into Storage. The beastkin spectators gave me a weird look, but given the distance and the fact that Clotho was half transparent, I hoped they merely thought I was controlling the wind through Green Magic.

After that, the big shots of Gaun—who were all super muscular for some reason—came over to offer me words of congratulations, and then the ceremony ended without mishap. It bothered me a little that the Beast King had not shown up, but there was little point in dwelling on it. *Time to head back!*

“Now then! It is finally time for the exhibition match specially hosted under the auspices of His Majesty the Beast King!” a girl’s voice shouted. Everyone’s attention was immediately drawn to her. She was standing atop a platform in the middle of the courtyard that had been bothering me ever since I’d arrived.

Ugh, I knew it. That’s the last stage left over from the Beast King Tournament, right? Made by Caesar-shi? And you, girl... You’re Leonhart, aren’t you? You look like the daughter of Elder Nellas from the Village of Elves, but you’re Leonhart, right?

The crowd buzzed.

“Did she just say ‘exhibition match’?”

“Was that on the schedule?”

“Well, it looks like fun. The tournament finals were canceled, so this works out!”

The confusion in the venue gradually shifted to excitement.

So this is the reason so many Gaunians were allowed in, to the point where they’re even filling up the entrances.

“Rank S adventurer ‘Grim Reaper’ Kelvin and ‘Empress’ Sera! Come up to the stage. Is this not the best stage you can ask for? You may fight to your hearts’ content!”

Although Leonhart’s tone and manner of speech were brash and authoritative, his mannerisms matched his appearance perfectly. He beckoned us over with a cute wave. The fever that had filled the coliseum the day before was back as all the spectators roared with

exhilaration and their eyes shone with expectation. There was no way I could say no. The invention made by my comrade, Kilito, floated overhead, and the protective barrier surrounding the stage was already in place. Leonhart had been very thorough with the preparations.

“So we ended up here after all,” I said with a sigh, turning to Sera. “What do you think? Wait, you’re already wearing Arondight?!”

My demon companion had donned her black gauntlets, a sharp mismatch with her dress. *Aren’t you a little too quick on the uptake?*

“Huh? Because we’re doing this, right? You’re already smiling, Kelvin.”

I am? Damn, I can never tell.

I fetched Black Staff of Disaster from Clotho’s Storage. “Just saying, but this isn’t the Beast King Festival. I’m going to use all the magic I want.”

“Just the way I like it! And I’ll use everything I have too! Um, Mel...”

“Don’t worry, we’ll maintain the barrier. You two can go all out.”

Since we sparred among ourselves pretty much every day, everyone in our party knew what needed to be prepared without having to be asked. The stage was good to go at any time.

Leonhart announced, “I will serve as referee. After all, when you two get serious, even Jereol can’t follow along. Any questions?”

“Nope, I’m good,” I said.

At the same time, Sera exclaimed, “None from me!”

The two of us got onto the stage and faced each other. It was a nice change of pace fighting in formal wear.

“Ready... FIGHT!”

It was an absolutely wonderful day for battling, with not a single cloud to mar the clear blue sky. Cheers rang far and wide from high up within the Castle of the Divine Tree.

Chapter 4: Enjoyment

The company trip to Gaun was nearing its end. A lot had happened, from the unplanned entry into the Beast King Festival to being attacked by the Apostles to the development in my relationship with Ange. Although everything had been very sudden and touch and go at times, they now made for wonderful memories. However, the trip was not quite over yet. We still had a few days that we fully intended on making the most of.

That was why we were currently high up in the sky in the northwestern part of Gaun, riding on Boga, Mdofarak, and Rosalia. As for Dahak...let's just say he was his usual self.

"We've gone pretty far," Ange said. "What's out here?"

I guffawed. "Ha! Ha! Ha! That's a funny joke, Ange. There's no way we wouldn't come here, right? Since we're in Gaun and all."

"Huh? Uh...I really can't recall there being any famous tourist spots in this area."

"Come now, there's no way you forgot about the Rank A dungeon known for being Gaun's most dangerous, the Cavern of the Divine Beasts!"

I had been so occupied with the promotion ceremony and the Demon Lord commotion that it had been quite a while since I last visited a dungeon. I would forever regret forgetting to visit the dungeons in Trycen before returning to Parth. However, I was someone who learned from his mistakes! I would not commit the same blunder this time.

"This...is a trip, right? Like, for fun?"

It's absolutely a trip for fun. Unfortunately, Sera made plans to hang out with Prettia and couldn't come. It's really, really unfortunate, but I do have Ange with me today, so we should have enough fighting strength. The dungeon probably won't see any other visitors, being Rank A and all, so we can completely clean it out without worrying about causing trouble for other people.

"Of course, part of the aim in clearing this dungeon is to help Shutola level up. I did promise her during the Beast King Festival."

"Thank you, dearest brother! I'll do my best to become strong!"

Shutola was filled with enthusiasm. Never mind Trycen, everyone across the continent knew how capable she was. The frustration she felt from the tournament now served as a huge impetus that would

surely push her to incredible heights.

“The tournament showed me that I had a lot to work on too,” Rion said. “I’ll show you how much I’ve grown, Kel-nii!”

“I’m looking forward to it.” *Ah, that’s right, Rion’s also been hard at work.*

After the Naming Ceremony, I had used Obsidian Fortress to rebuild the coliseum, making it much sturdier than before, and Dahak had used his Construction skill to replace all the houses and pavement that had been destroyed. Consequently, the Beast King had said he wanted to give us remuneration. We had not expected payment in the first place and turned him down, but he said he did not want to feel like he owed us a debt. So I requested that he hold practice matches with Rion several times during the remainder of our stay in the country.

Due to the underhanded tactics he employed, Rion had lost to him without fully utilizing her strength. While the memory of that was still fresh, I had her begin practice matches with the Beast King whenever they both had a spare moment. This was not training to develop her fighting techniques but rather to bolster her mental fortitude. Specifically, he fought her while looking like people that she treasured, such as Shutola and me, pretty much just repeating what he had done when they met in the tournament. It was so hard to watch that I found myself clenching my fists hard enough to draw blood multiple times. However, I repeated “This is for Rion’s sake” to myself like a mantra. Considering how many times my heart veered on the verge of breaking, my own mental fortitude got quite the tempering too.

After we passed a small mountain, Efil reported, “Master, the Cavern of the Divine Beasts has come into view.”

I placed a hand on her shoulder to borrow Farsight through Skill Eater. Sure enough, when I squinted, I could see the cave opening in the rocky face far ahead.

“All right. We’re arriving soon. Everyone, final equipment checks!”

A lively chorus of “Okay!” came from Shutola, Rion, and Ruka.

Although we were indeed concerned about what the Apostles would do next, raising the levels of my party members was a valid method of precaution. More than anything, my own level had not been going up much as of late. No matter how many low-ranked monsters I killed, it only amounted to a drop in the bucket. So I had set my eye on this Cavern of the Divine Beasts. I wasn’t here so much for the small fry wandering the interior of the dungeon. No, the reason I’d decided to make the trip was because I had heard that a Divine Pillar was supposed to be here.

We eventually descended in between two unadorned cliffs of bare rock. Following Rosalia and Mdofarak, Boga landed with a great crash, sending tremors through the ground and frightening nearby monsters into running like a flock of startled birds.

Hm? Even the Rank B monsters ran away. I guess it's less an issue of levels as it is species.

"Let's set up camp. This looks like a good place."

I said "let's," but it's mostly me doing the work! A quick cast of Obsidian Fortress and a bungalow seemingly rose from the ground. Done.

"Those in my party will head into the dungeon first. Shutola, you wait here with Ruka and the maids. Boga and Mdofarak, you two are staying behind also. That cave is too small for you to fit inside. Guard the campsite while I'm gone."

"Rawr..."

"Roar..."

Come on, don't look so disappointed. Clearing and destroying the dungeon at the same time is beyond even me. Instead, you two should focus on learning how to take human form. Your sizes really limit the places I can take you.

"I understand, dearest brother. I should go in only after my level rises high enough, right?"

A normal child would throw a tantrum and cry, "But I want to go too!" What a relief that Shutola is so mature and understanding. I mean, she actually is an adult, so...yeah, that might be it.

"That's right. Since this is a Rank A dungeon, we should be done pretty quickly. We'll fetch you when the time is right, so just rest up until then. Since you aren't used to dungeon diving, the experience will probably be quite tiring."

"Okay!"



Darkness enveloped the interior of the cavern. Naturally, there were no braces on the walls for torches; a Rank A dungeon wasn't going to be that easy. *The monsters that live here probably have Night Vision. In fact, there we go; there's a pair of red eyes glowing up ahead. Is it a feline-type monster?*

"Efil."

"Yes, Master. I will use Milliard Burning Birds to eliminate the monsters and illuminate our way."

Efil's magic took form as a flock of fire birds that burst into appearance in quick succession and blazed their way down the passage. Soon enough, yelps and wails of pain sounded up ahead as the cave filled with the awful stench of burned flesh.

Wait, no, this is the mouthwatering fragrance of steak sizzling on the grill. The more I smell it, the hungrier I get and the more I feel the saliva welling up inside my mouth.

“Uh, Efil, can you stop cooking while we’re fighting? Mostly for Mel’s sake.”

“My apologies, Master. I was attempting an idea that I had...”

That attitude of constantly trying new ideas is indeed wonderful, but the smell of grilled meat filling the passage is making Melfina drool a waterfall. There’s no choice; let’s have her stay at the back and focus on supporting us until she gets her appetite back under control.

“Wow, it’s so bright!” Ange exclaimed. “You really are amazing, Efil-chan!”

After attacking—or technically, cooking—the monsters in our way, instead of disappearing, Efil’s fire birds returned to circle around our party, lighting up our surroundings in lieu of torches. The ones that had gone ahead perched on the walls, casting more light along our way. Our visibility was as good as it could get.

“So these are the monsters you just killed,” I murmured, examining the forms that gradually came into view. “Panther, tiger, lion...”

“Is this dungeon mainly occupied by felines?” Ange asked curiously.

They’re all double the usual sizes and grilled to perfection.

“For now, let’s proceed with Gerard as the vanguard and Mel covering our rear. Mel, you know better than to eat what you pick up off the ground, right?”

“O-Of course I do! Do you even have to ask?”

Look me in the eyes and say it again, you gluttonous goddess. But ugh, I really do feel like having some steak now...



“Hmph!”

A single swing of Gerard’s greatsword bisected all four hyena-like monsters that rushed our way. His blade converted all the blood sticking to its surface to MP, fueling the skill that continued to buff his stats. The fight turned even more one-sided as time went on.

“Gerard-san doesn’t let a single monster get past him, so there’s really nothing for us to do.”

“Om nom nom?” (Then you want to eat some of this too, Ange?)

“Ah...nah, I’m good. We *are* technically still in battle.”

We had continued deeper into the cave system, with Gerard making short work of the occasional monster that appeared. Before long, the passage opened up into a huge cavern that turned out to be a nesting ground for monsters. It was the home of the Rank A gray-

furred hyenas called murder aces. The bare, exposed walls extended all the way into the distance, stretching so far that we couldn't see the other end even in the fire birds' light. Gerard stood at the entrance to the next passage, cheerfully taking care of all the monsters rushing over.

"Ga ha ha! I'm sure Shutola's level is shooting through the roof at the moment! Shutola, your grandpa is doing his very best!"

My knight companion was slicing and dicing while laughing at the top of his lungs as the wave of monsters kept coming and coming. There was no end to their numbers. However, Gerard wasn't particularly struggling, so there was no need for us to help. That left those of us in the back twiddling our thumbs. Mel was already digging into her lunch with gusto.

"Since there's the word 'ace' in these monsters' names, does it mean there are lower-ranked species that aren't 'aces'? What do you think, Alex?"

"Arf." (I guess.)

It always impresses me how chill my party is even in the middle of battle. This place is great for earning XP for Shutola, but our time is limited. I do want to find that Divine Pillar today.

"It's about time, Gerard. Let's wrap things up."

"What?! But I want to do more for Shutola, my king!"

Man, you sound like a desperate man obsessed with financially supporting a terrible girlfriend. Not that Shutola is terrible. She's the absolute sweetest! And she's definitely no one's girlfriend!

"Mowing down inferior enemies is fun and all, but fights that don't pose a challenge are only going to dull your skills. What's more, we still have the fight with the Divine Pillar coming up. Bottle up your enthusiasm for when we find it."

"Hm, you do make a fair point."

After reluctantly acquiescing, Gerard fired off several rounds of Agito that wiped out all the monsters in view. Howls went up from deeper within the cavern, but our road had opened up.

"Master, should I also use my flames?"

"That would be efficient, but we're in a closed environment. Use Merciless instead of Penumbra. All right, let's go!"



Around the time when Kelvin's party started getting serious about fighting their way through the Cavern of the Divine Beasts, an elegant tea party was underway in the bungalow erected at the campsite outside of the dungeon. The maids Rosalia and Huba were serving, and the table was loaded with fragrant black tea and famous Gaunian confections. Sitting at the table was the close-knit pair of Shutola and

Ruka, the latter of whom was supposed to be a maid herself.

“Auuugh...”

“Are you okay, Shutola-chan?”

“I’m okay...but I’m also not okay...”

Shutola was so flustered that the hand holding her teacup was trembling. She normally had no trouble keeping a clear head despite being dragged into crazy situations by those around her, but this moment was an exception. Right now, she was panicked, and there was a specific reason for it.

“Ugh, my head... The level-up fanfare just keeps going...”

Due to the efforts of the grandfather who was giving it his all for his grandchild’s sake, Shutola’s level, which used to be merely fourteen, was now increasing at light speed. Every time the fanfare for a level-up finished playing, it started up again, as if each repetition were lining up, waiting its turn. Shutola was keeping an eye on her Status window, watching the numbers climb higher and higher. The results of this tradition of power leveling unique to Kelvin’s party left her young mind bewildered.

“Ahh, it was like that for me too— Owwie!” Ruka crouched down, clutching the throbbing area at the top of her head where a fist had just landed.

“How much longer are you going to shirk your duties, Ruka?!” Ellie scolded her before turning to the princess. “I’m terribly sorry, Shutola-sama, for my daughter’s continued disres— I see you are quite occupied at the moment. May I suggest ignoring the level-up screens for the moment? It is only the final numbers that truly matter, after all.”

“I-Is that how it is?”

Both Ellie and Ruka had experienced power leveling before. As such, they could understand what Shutola was currently going through.

“That’s right, Shutola-sama!” Huba added, giving her a thumbs-up. “It’s not as if you’re duty bound to keep staring at your Status screen!”

“Look at you acting all cool now”—Rosalia smiled—“when you were just as flustered a short while ago.”

“Y-You didn’t need to bring that up, Rosalia!”

Rosalia held out two hands to placate her colleague. “All right, all right. But still, I have to wonder what spell Master is using to pull this off. Normally, the experience gained by being part of a party when staying this far away, without delivering the final blow, is almost negligible.”

“Don’t think I’ll let you off the hook just because you changed the subject!”

“Now, how about leaving it at that?” Ellie cut in. “Shutola-sama, would you like to read a book to pass the ti— Oh?”

Just as Ellie was about to reach towards the mini Clotho on the table to take out a book, the slime began vibrating.

“This appears to be the signal from Master. Shutola-sama, someone will be coming to fetch you soon.”

“Really? Um, where’s my teddy bear? I need to bring him along.”

Shutola hopped out of her chair and pattered around, getting her things in order.



The first nest we discovered was soon followed by more of the same deeper within the dungeon. All of the nests were filled with overwhelming numbers of ferocious Rank A beasts. This was proving to be a dungeon that would be quite the challenge for any but the most disciplined party made up of the most powerful Rank A adventurers around. For us, however, it felt like taking a stroll through a safari park.

After all the ups and downs, we eventually reached an archway that led to a huge open area that was likely the deepest chamber in the dungeon. In sharp contrast to the bare rock that had lined the passages so far, the walls here were lined with polished gray blocks that gave it the feel of a temple. A large altar towered in the middle of the room.

“Yep, that’s the Divine Pillar’s altar,” Rion confirmed. “It looks exactly like the one we saw in Parth.”

“So that’s Elearis’s handiwork. It’s been a while since I last felt like I might level up!”

“Honey, I’m sorry to say this when you sound so excited, but please be careful. I mean it. Although she has lost her power, we are still facing something created by a goddess.”

“Don’t worry, I get it.”

I suppressed my rising excitement with an iron will as we covertly peered through the archway.

“It’s about time for Efil and Alex to reach the entrance, right?”

When the time had seemed right, I’d sent the two of them to fetch Shutola.

Even if she’s not going to directly participate in the fight—we’ll make sure she stays at a safe distance—her level should be high enough now for her to follow along with what’s happening. Hopefully, this will help her gain confidence.

“Are we going to wait here until they return?” Ange asked.

I shook my head. “Nah, let’s go in first to secure the place and make sure it’s safe. Make sure there are no traps or anything.”

At first glance, the cavern is entirely empty except for the altar, and there are no other monsters within. However, I feel a large presence distinct from that of the Divine Pillar. In all likelihood, it's the dungeon boss—we haven't encountered it yet, after all.

"Then let me go!" Ange said, enthusiastically raising one hand. "Scouting is my forte!"

That's true; she's definitely the best at it in our party.

"Okay, we'll count on you, Ange. Mel and I will stay behind you to provide support. Gerard and Rion, ready yourselves so you can leap out at any time."

"Yay, my first-ever mission! I'll do my best!"

In contrast to her rising excitement, Ange's presence paled until it seemed to fade away altogether. Without ado, she promptly stepped through the archway and approached the altar. Abruptly, the roof of the cavern started raining dust and sand as a sound similar to Boga munching rocks started up. The din grew closer and closer until all of a sudden, the blocks in the ceiling gave way and a giant form came crashing down right before the altar.

"Gugah gah gah gah! We found them! Found them! The hateful intruders who killed our brethren!"

"We did it! Found them!"

"Tear them apart! Rain blood! Have them for dinner!"

The huge cloud of dust blew away, revealing a gigantic monster with three heads all adorned with vicious fangs. The description "three-headed" first brought Mdofarak to mind, but all the heads on this creature were of differing species. In short, this was a chimera. The left head was a crocodile, the middle head was a lion, and the right head was a tiger. The crocodile head seemed really out of place, but the monster had a snake as a tail and a pair of wings—consistency clearly wasn't something it prioritized.

"We will eat you first, puny girl! That will at least fill our stoma—Huh?"

When the chimera turned towards Ange, she was already gone. Instead, two of the heads saw something passing by.

"Ahh, this head... Yeah, I don't want it," Ange said from the monster's back, her voice sounding heavily laden with disinterest and disappointment.

The tiger and crocodile heads turned around just in time to see the lion falling to the ground.



“Y-You vermin!”

“How dare you?! How dare you?!”

However, Ange was no longer on the chimera’s back. She was already walking back to us.

“So slow on the uptake,” she murmured to the beast without even turning back. “It’s already over and you still don’t know it.”

The tiger and crocodile heads both went, “Huh?” but before they could make another sound, the throwing knives tagged with talismans protruding from their foreheads exploded with the same amount of destructive force that had put Clive, a Rank S sword, out of commission. After losing all three heads, all that was left was the torso and snake tail— Apologies, that was a lie. The snake tail had been severed long ago.

With a resounding boom, the chimera’s huge form crashed to the ground, sounding Ange’s near-instant victory.

“Doesn’t look like there are any other monsters or traps in the room.”

“Uh...thanks, Ange. Good work.”

One wouldn’t have thought it from the way she came back to us humming like she had just returned from a stroll, but not only had Ange wiped the floor with the dungeon boss in the blink of an eye, she had also finished surveying the interior of the chamber during that same time.

That chimera is at least as strong as the evil dragon we fought in Toraj, right? Ange ran even faster than the knives she threw at the start. When buffed with Sonic Acceleration, she’s seriously a force to be reckoned with.

In addition to Uncontainable, Ange possessed one other Unique Skill, Assassin’s Strike, which enabled her to deal massive amounts of damage to enemies that were unaware of her presence. In simpler terms, any attack she landed on someone she caught off guard would be a critical hit. Her phenomenal speed had incredible synergy with this skill, creating a truly terrifying combination. I would know—I had been beheaded by her once.

I used Analyze Eye on the headless corpse. “High Beast Chimera. Yep, this is the dungeon boss.”

Although the fight had been over so fast—if it could even be called a fight—this was still a Rank S monster. It was rare enough, so I had Clotho retrieve the body in case we could make use of some of its parts.

Okay, that’s the quest from the guild done. Now we’re moving on to personal business.

“Ah, Kel-nii, looks like Efil-nee and Alex are back.”

“Impressive speed as always.” I turned around just in time to see Efil appearing from the passage.

“Apologies for keeping you waiting, Master.”

“Ha ha, don’t worry, you didn’t make us wait. Thank you for always appearing just when I need you. Good work to you too, Alex.”

When I expressed my gratitude towards Efil and her shadow, Alex’s face popped out. The rest of his body soon followed, revealing Shutola clinging to the soft, fluffy fur of his back.

“Arf?” (You okay?)

“It felt really nice!”

Alex was capable of dragging anyone holding on to his body into the shadows with him. The space inside the shadows was a cubic area, with the size and details being different depending on the source of the shadow. If it was a shadow cast by a lump of rock, the space would be rough, stony, and barren, whereas shadows cast by living beings reflected the beings’ mentalities. For example, Efil’s shadow was perfectly clean and entirely comfortable. It probably even came with room service, if I had to guess. I’d only enjoyed the experience a few times. According to Alex, the most comfortable shadow was Rion’s, which was to be expected.

“Arf, awooooohhh, huff.” (We were fast because Efil ran straight through. I can’t go that fast myself.)

Ange was the fastest in our party by far, but then next were Efil and Melfina. As coming here required passing many dangerous monsters, I had sent Alex along with the express purpose of bringing Shutola safely to us. Him keeping Shutola within Efil’s shadow guaranteed that the princess wouldn’t come to harm.

“What level are you now, Shutola?” I asked.

“Um...I’m Level 77,” she replied, clambering down.

“Nice, it went up quite a bit.” *Looks like it paid off killing all those Rank A monsters and the boss just now. Experience Sharing proving its worth once again.*

“My king, was there any need to bring Shutola here? Couldn’t she have watched through the Network?”

Gerard looked so fidgety and nervous that he reminded me of parents attending their child’s class for their first-ever Parents’ Day, worrying about how their child would perform.

“There’s a limit to how much can be seen secondhand. More importantly, what Shutola needs right now is to gain confidence in herself by following the fight with her own eyes. Even Rosalia gave her permission. We went over this yesterday, didn’t we?”

“Still...”

“Don’t worry, Grandpa Gerard!” Shutola cut in, her eyes sparkling with innocence. “If I’m ever in danger, you’ll save me, won’t you?”

Ah, she said it.

“What’s one measly Divine Pillar, right?! I can take it on myself! Ha ha ha!”

How reassuring. One word from Shutola is more effective than a thousand from me when it comes to convincing Gerard. All right, now that the opposition has been eliminated, let’s get the final briefing underway.

“Shutola, you’ll be staying in the back with Mel. Mel, erect a barrier to protect the two of you. This position is the safest out of all the locations that command a great view of the cavern. Efil, you and I will stand back a little as middle guard. Rion, Ange, Gerard, and Alex, you’ll be in the front as vanguard. I heard that when you secretly fought the Divine Pillar with Sera before my promotion ceremony, it was really powerful. To my absolute disappointment.”

“Honey, your personal emotions are leaking out. Return to talking about the strategy, please.”

“Oh, sorry. Couldn’t help it.” *I mean, come on. They got to fight such a fun opponent by themselves! Without inviting m—*

Melfina sighed. “Looks like Honey’s off in his own world again, so I’ll take it from here. What we are fighting today is a Divine Pillar, a fragment of an ancient goddess. You can think of the Pillars as minor deities. The Divine Pillar that you defeated in Parth with Sera and Goldiana-san was Galonzolf, the Divine Wolf. Similarly, this altar houses Diamante, the Divine Beast. When a Pillar is destroyed, its divine power is absorbed by the other remaining Pillars. That means Diamante will be stronger than Galonzolf was. We should have enough fighting strength on our side to handle it, but always stay sharp and on your toes!”

Both Rion and Shutola raised a hand and said, “Okay!” in unison.

As Melfina nodded with a “Very good,” I wondered if this was how parents felt on Parents’ Day. *What do you think, Melfina-sensei?*

“Everything else aside, I do have to give Elearis some credit,” I murmured, nodding with satisfaction. “This system where the remaining Pillars get more powerful the more you destroy is nothing short of wonderful.”

“A normal person facing them would consider it a problem, honey.”

Huh?



The Divine Pillars were minor gods created by Elearis, the previous Goddess of Reincarnation, in order to wipe out the Demon Lord and demon race should the world fall into danger. Thankfully, not once in history had a summoned Hero lost to a Demon Lord, so the Pillars had never had to act. Even if they did, however, they did

not possess the ability to overcome the skill characteristic of all Demon Lords, Mara Pisuna, which rendered the individual impervious to all damage dealt by beings of this world. As such, all they could do was buy time until the next Hero was summoned and trained. There were a total of ten, each possessing power rivaling that of a Demon Lord, scattered throughout the world.

I couldn't have been happier to hear about all this. Aside from Galonzolf, who had been in Parth and was killed by Sera and the others, there were still four more on the Eastern Continent. Even after Melfina took up the mantle of Goddess of Reincarnation and they lost most of their power, they were still hibernating somewhere, waiting for the day when they would be needed. Maybe. Either way, there was a definite possibility that Elearis would use them for her own evil purposes should she come back. Since Melfina had given us express permission, we fully intended on using them to bolster our own levels.

"I guess it's a bit late to ask this, but we aren't going to get into trouble with Deramis for killing these Pillars, right?" *They're not still worshiped as holy beings, are they?*

"It is true that the Divine Pillars are under the jurisdiction of Deramis. There are a few that they are aware of, and those locations have been established as holy sites. However, as you can tell with Galonzolf being in a newly discovered dungeon, Deramis doesn't have information on all of them."

"And this one is okay to fight?"

"I believe so. Due to it being located in the depths of such a high-ranked dungeon, I doubt that many are aware of its presence. However, it would be wise to pay Deramis a visit if we intend to go around destroying the other Pillars."

Then to Deramis we must go. Honestly, if it's Melfina doing the asking, Colette will probably happily help us get through whatever red tape might exist.

"By the way, how are we going to activate the altar without Seranee?" Rion asked suddenly.

Oh right, last time the altar activated when Sera touched it. If the trigger was her race...

"Wouldn't Gerard do? Since he's basically wearing a Demon Lord's armor. He looks evil enough, at least."

"What are you saying, my king? You won't find another knight as purehearted as me even if you were to scour the entire world!"

"All right, all right. But still, it won't hurt to give it a touch. If it doesn't work, I'll use my magic to beat it awake."

"If you say so..."

Once everyone had assumed battle positions, Gerard stepped up and placed a hand on the altar. But there was no response, prompting

him to sigh and shrug his shoulders.

“See? Nothing happens when I—”

“Gerard, behind you!” I barked.

At the same time, Rion exclaimed, “It’s glowing!”

“Uh...seriously?”

After a slight pause, the altar emanated a blinding light that filled the cavern. I thought I caught Gerard looking really down, but then the light enveloped everything.

Nope, I saw nothing.



“Are you okay, Shutola?” Mel asked while throwing up a hand to protect me from the white light.

I nodded. “Th-Thank you, dearest sister Mel.”

Mel was usually an insatiable glutton, but she was also a kind big sister who could be relied on to pull through when needed. That didn’t offset her being a hopeless glutton, though.

“I confess, it’s my first time seeing one of the Divine Pillars in person too. Even I don’t know what to expect,” she said before chanting a spell that generated a barrier separating us from Kelvin. It expanded with cracks and crackling sounds, forming a beautiful dome made of ice with a high degree of transparency that made it easy to see what was going on outside. Soon, the light from the altar faded away.

“A mask?” I murmured.

“It is indeed a mask,” Mel agreed.

The fading light revealed a beast about as big as Alex that looked like a karajishi, a stylized depiction of a lion unique to Torajian culture. Its face was hidden behind a white mask, but I recognized its distinctive dull bronze body. It was like one of the ink drawings on the folding screens we saw in a souvenir shop in Toraj had come to life.

“Gurororuoaaahhhh!”

The fierce mouth behind the mask opened wide as the beast howled with a cry that I had never heard before. However, everyone on the front line had already leaped into action.

::Prison of Slashes...close!::

Just as I thought Rion was setting up a move, I noticed the space surrounding the karajishi warping and many invisible things flying its way. Metallic screeches rang out as slashes appeared on the bronze body.

::I can hurt it somewhat, but that mask is way too hard!::

::Don’t worry, Rion! I’ll attack it from the front, so you circle around!::

I could hear Grandpa Gerard’s and Rion’s voices directly in my

head because of Kelvin's power. Before I'd entered the dungeon, a small clone of Clotho had been given to me, which made me part of a telepathic network that was supposed to be between Kelvin and those Contracted with him as Followers. I recalled how I had been envious of Colette in the past when I saw her instructing those serving her without having to speak out loud. Now I could even talk with Alex. I never imagined this would be how one of my dreams would be granted.

::Shutola, how're you finding the Network? Can you properly see what everyone's doing?::

::Oh, dearest brother! Mm-hm, I can hear and see just fine. I'm still appreciating the effects of having leveled up so much!::

I could make out the fight with the karajishi better than I'd ever seen anything. Before, my eyes couldn't keep up; now, Grandpa Gerard's and Alex's movements were as clear as day. Rion I could see as an afterima— Oh.

::I'm sorry, I still can't see dearest sister Ange::

::Her speed is like an outlier among outliers, so don't worry about it. When she gets serious, there are times when *I* lose sight of her too::

I suddenly realized there were kunai buried in all of the karajishi's wounds. Those knives belonged to Ange, which meant she had thrown them in the brief moment I had looked away.

::Gouging wounds is the basics! Aha ha!::

Uh, it's like a switch got flipped inside her.

::To explain,:: Mel said, ::Rion has Diamante trapped right now, so Ange is attacking it from behind. That attack just shaved off a fourth of its HP thanks to Assassin's Strike. With so many possessing Flight and Sky Walk distracting the opponent, Ange is having a really easy time doing what she does best. Whenever there's an opening, she's throwing poisoned kunai into the same wounds with a very deft handling of her Throwing skill::

::Annnnd there you have Melfina-sensei's much appreciated commentary,:: Kelvin joked.

::Th-Thank you, dearest sister Mel::

I turned back just in time to see the very angry karajishi assume a charging position. My brother and I were directly in its path. At this rate—

::Worry not! I will stop it in its tracks!:: Grandpa Gerard shouted as he planted himself firmly in front of the monster. His usual silliness was gone, replaced by the figure of a knight who would throw himself in harm's way to protect the weak. Strangely, he reminded me of Grandpa Dan.

“Gurorouuuuhhhh!”

Even though its metallic appearance gave it the image of being

stiff and slow, the karajishi managed to reach its top speed the instant it burst into motion. A moment later, it crashed into Grandpa Gerard like a massive bullet.

::HNGRH! It's forceful, but it's nowhere near pushing me to the ropes like Goldiana-dono does!::

Grandpa Gerard used the same black shield he had stopped the monster's charge with to uppercut it, sending it flying straight up. Alex snuck in just then, unleashing more slashes than I could count using the purple blade in his mouth in the time it took our opponent to hit the ground. After Rion's and Ange's following attacks, the creature couldn't even stand up anymore.

::Everyone's so amazing!:: I clapped excitedly. ::You're winning so easily!::

::Hmm, but at this rate, we're going to have a problem,:: Kelvin said.

Mel agreed, ::We are indeed.::

I was confused. *What's the problem? Um, I don't see it... They're winning, right? My brother and sisters are all so amazing. They can pick up on so many things that I still don't know about. I've got to study more!*

::At this rate, I won't get any of the action, will I?::

::At this rate, the meat's going to get poisoned and won't taste as good anymore.::

Uh...I've got to pull it together. What more can I do to help them? How can I contribute to thank everyone for everything they've done for me?

Before heading out to the dungeon that day, I had already picked up Double Growth Rate and Double Skill Points, the only two skills that Kelvin insisted on. It had cost almost all the Skill Points I had, but all the levels I gained today had made up—no, *more than* made up what I had spent many times over.

It surprised me so much that I got all flustered. I wonder if I made Ruka-chan and Huba worry about me? I should say sorry to them later.

To be honest, before Kelvin told me about those two skills, I had never even heard of them. Being able to get twice as many stat points and Skill Points from leveling up almost felt like breaking the rules.

I tried to save up as much SP as I could just in case I ever needed to use the points, but I can finally spend as much as I want, right? Hmm, I still don't want to waste any, though, so I should really think carefully about it.

::Mel, I'm going in. Take care of Shutola.::

::She's safe with me. Have fun, honey.::

Hearing his voice prompted me to look at Kelvin. He had his long, long scythe in hand and was just about to charge in. Mel was seeing him off with a gentle smile on her face.

They already seem to have the fight in hand. They don't really need his

help, do they?

::Unfortunately, your dearest brother is afflicted with an incurable condition that makes it so that he just *has* to fight when he sees a particularly powerful opponent,:: Mel answered me telepathically as if reading my mind. ::He's already done a good job holding himself back for so long today. He was trying to give everyone their turn. Looks like he's about reached the end of his rope, though.::

I know that dearest brother has a unique disposition, since it's general knowledge, but his condition is much more severe than I thought. Still, this is a good opportunity. I should take a good look at what skills everyone else has. Maybe it'll give me some ideas!



The fight was in the middle of shifting into the next phase just as I prepared to join the fray.

“Guruoaaarororo!”

After losing all five of its senses due to the slashes Alex had landed with Lethal, Diamante let out a roar that it couldn't even hear while flailing around violently. Its tail smashed craters into the ground as its huge jaws crushed stone with each resounding snap. However, while its power was truly incredible, there was no way such haphazard attacks could land on any of them. As such, we weren't particularly bothered.

“Aha ha!” Ange ducked beneath the monster's tail and unleashed another stab with her dagger, Vicious Sword Carnage, a Rank S weapon that poisoned anyone who touched its blade with a toxin far worse than any that could be naturally applied. The more Diamante thrashed, the more the poison circulated throughout its body, steadily chipping away at its HP.

::It's almost dead!::

::Don't let your guard down just yet, lass! Beasts are most dangerous when they're cornered!::

::Grrrrr!:: (Speaking of which, it's doing something!)

Ange just happened to have retreated as part of her hit-and-run technique when Alex noticed the monster's mask glowing faintly and warned everyone through the Network. The next instant, the light it was giving off exploded in intensity and burst forward.

BWOOOOON!

It was a super thick laser beam. Diamante began spamming blasts wherever its mask turned, paying no mind to the damage it was doing to the structural integrity of the cave. Having lost all its senses, the beast was now relying solely on intuition and detection skills while bringing all its power to bear.

::Ah, it's switched to indiscriminately shooting blasts of highly

concentrated mana when its beast-like close-quarters fighting style proved useless,:: Melfina commented.

::Will we be all right here?:: Shutola asked, her voice tinged with worry.

Several beams of light had smashed into the Sub-Zero Rampart that Melfina had thrown up. All the shaking and rumbling was making her a little anxious.

::There's nothing to worry about. The blasts are strong, but this is nothing compared to Efil's bombardment.::

::R-Really?::

Seeing as she's gnawing on a drumstick while maintaining the barrier, I guess the answer is yes, really. Dignity as a goddess and all that aside...

Of course, just because those in the back were safe, it did not mean we were going to let Diamante continue rampaging around.

::Sit!::

::What Rion-chan said, doggie!::

Rion and Ange, the first two to successfully close in on the monster while dodging the randomly flying beams, promptly attacked it from above. First, Ange smashed a flying kick bolstered by multiple accelerations using Sky Walk down onto the monster's head. Its entire bulk slammed into the ground as the beams firing from its mask fizzled out. Rion was immediately on hand to deliver a follow-up attack, having switched her weapon out for Caladbolg. The lightning crackling furiously along its length indicated that she had already cast Thunderclap Edge on it. With terrifying speed, she shattered the armor on all four limbs of the beast laid out on the ground. And the tail too, for good measure.

::Lightning Skewer!::

Thanks to Residual Slice, each thrust with Caladbolg left an invisible blade that served as an electric stake nailing Diamante to the ground. The electricity searing the beast from within combined with the effect of the deadly poison from earlier left it unable to move a muscle. To top things off, Alex used his shadows to tie down the massive form.

::All that's left is this mask!:: Gerard's greatsword whistled down with the intention of finishing the monster off.

CLAAANG!

::What?!::

The large blade had bounced off, failing to leave a scratch even with the knight's incredible strength. Just as I was wondering what material the mask could possibly have been made of to repel even him, it started glowing again.

::How is it so tough?! My hands are all numb!::

Leaving aside the question of whether an empty suit of armor

could actually feel numbness, it was finally time for my turn.

If it was going to come down to this, I should have just stood in the front at the start. Oh, but I wanted to let Rion and the others gain experience. What a difficult call... But never mind! Gotta focus!

I strode forward. *Gerard, let me.*

::Mm? However— Ah, I see. Yes, please go ahead::

After watching Gerard take a step back, I raised Boreas Death Scythe and swung it. The curved blade dug into the mask that had proven impervious to all other attacks so far.

“Gurooooooh?!”

Like a knife through butter, my weapon bisected the mask with no resistance whatsoever, sending it flying through the air. To my surprise, the traditional karajishi face that was exposed had, in its forehead, a resplendent yellow gem. It looked entirely out of place.

Is that a Magical Jewel in its forehead? The highest quality ones are made from diamonds, but that doesn't look like diamond. Is it something else?

::Kel-nii! Even without the mask, the jewel is glowing!::

Ah, maybe the beam wasn't coming from the mask but from this Magical Jewel. That means the mask was actually a shield to protect this source—

::I just said the jewel's glowing! There's no time to calmly analyze it! It's dangerous!::

Hm? Nah, don't worry. Efil's already finished making her preparations.

Right at that moment, Efil dispelled Covert Action, appearing at the edge of the wall where she had been lying in wait.

::Blessing of the Flame Dragon King for extra fire elemental damage, Blue Flame to negate all elemental resistance, Rank S Red Magic spell Bursting Heat to double the damage dealt upon impact, and concentrating the mana to increase the arrow's penetrative capability— All ready. I can fire at any time, Master::

The bow that Efil was drawing, Penumbra, was enveloped with fiercely roaring azure-colored flames. There was so much fire that it seemed to make the bow look much larger than it actually was. *That's not a bow anymore; it's a ballista.*

Efil, I'm grabbing the Jewel first, I said through the Network. Then feel free to serve it up however you want.

I swung my scythe to cut off the shining gem on Diamante's forehead, then used Air Pressure to sink its face into the ground. Of course, I could have finished things then and there by myself, but I wanted to see how powerful Efil's attack had become.

::Understood, Master. Tonight's main dish will be meat loaf!::

Uh, that's not really what I meant, but...it sounds delicious, so I'm all

for it! Okay, time to back off. I need to tell everyone to retreat... Okay, done. Go for it, Efil!

::Melting Blaze Arrow::

The attack that she immediately unleashed was the most powerful I had ever seen from her.



Instead of going with Kelvin and the others, Sera went out to have a stroll around the capital of Gaun with Goldiana and Grostina. The trio of friends, composed of a beauty and two beasts, greatly enjoyed each other's company as they shopped for clothes and checked out delicious pastries. And behind them was Dahak, following the group like a stalker, the last element of this curiously adolescent scene.

Or at least, that was how Dahak had expected the day to go when he came outside hoping to catch a glimpse of Goldiana in casual wear. However, his assumptions could not have been more wrong. As it turned out, Sera's plan for the day did not involve playing.

"That's good, Sera-chan. Keep going, keep circling that ki inside your body."

"Sister dear, this girl really is a genius!"

"Dahak-chan, you need to calm your thoughts more. Your agitation and impatience is coming through."

"R-Right, okay..."

Goldiana, Grostina, Sera, and Dahak were currently at the main dojo established by the Wild Beast Style School—the one that taught iai quick draw—in the capital. This was also the place where Roma, the man Kelvin had defeated in the first round of the tournament, taught students as a senior instructor. Naturally, there were plenty of Wild Beast Style students in a place like this. All of them were now sitting against the wall, staring closely at what was going on.

Sera, who didn't seem to mind, was practicing forms in the middle of the room, clad in a gi. Even though her motions were slow and measured, rivulets of sweat were streaming down her face. Her eyes were dead serious, her concentration sharpened to the limit. It wasn't that she didn't mind the stares; she had simply banished them from her mind long ago.

Uh, why am I doing this right now? Dahak thought, confused. He was doing his best to imitate what he was seeing from his position next to Sera, but his movements were awkward and clumsy.

In the first place, he didn't even understand the point of the display. This morning, he had taken the idea of Sera heading out to join Goldiana and Grostina at face value and started tailing her as soon as she left the inn. When he saw her walking into this place, he had snuck inside in pursuit. Everything was fine until Sera's sharp

intuition had picked up on his presence.

“Oh, you’re here for training too, Dahak?” she had asked.

“Y-Yeah! Actually, I am!”

The dragon deeply regretted the answer he had blurted out at the time. As the saying went, the mouth was the source of disasters; trying to get through a tricky situation with a random reply had blown up in his face. What had followed was a training session under Goldiana’s supervision that focused less on how to move one’s body and more on how to manipulate ki.

For Dahak, who never really relied on martial arts while fighting, all this talk was going in one ear and out the other. It was only through the power of love that he managed to stick it out until the very end. He still wasn’t actually learning anything, though.

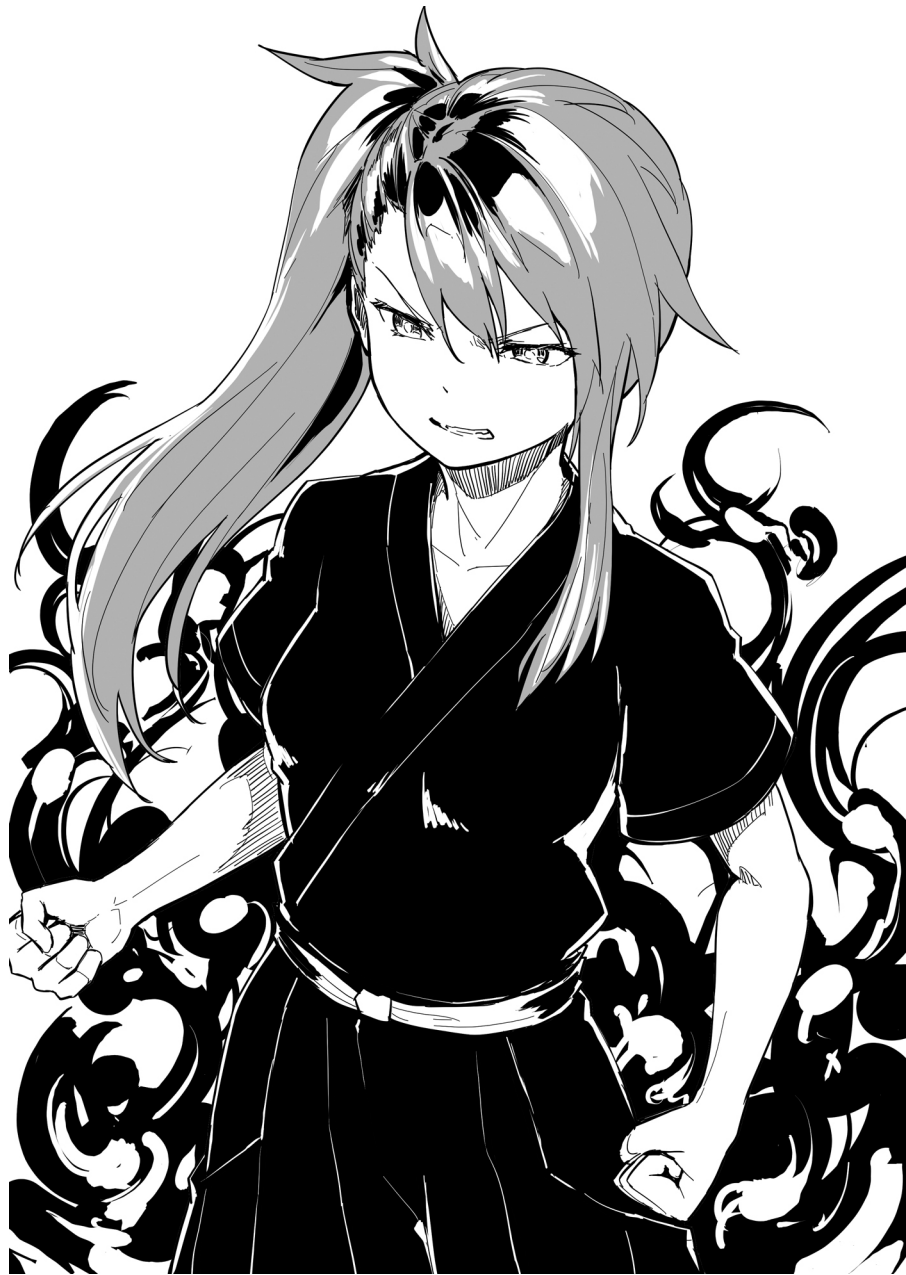
But hey, I got to see Prettia-chan in a gi, so I’d call this a win!

He might not have learned anything, but he was satisfied.

“Sister dear, Sera-chan’s ki...”

“Mm-hm, I sense it too.”

Dahak’s struggles aside, Goldiana and Grostina had just noticed a change that Sera was undergoing. The ki that she was wearing had begun adopting a more vivid hue—a beautiful ruby red that throbbed with life as if it were blood. It was only a thin aura on her skin at the moment, but it was clear enough that even the Wild Beast Style students could see it.



“That...is not the basic red, is it, sister dear?”

“That’s right. It’s not just any red—it’s redder than red. It’s so vibrant! She’s shot right past the basics and has found her own color. Sera-chan has already made Goldia her own!”

Suddenly, Sera exhaled sharply and fell on her behind. “Phew! I can’t hold it any longer!” The red aura around her dissipated. “Gosh! It’s so hard! If I move fast, it just scatters! Maintaining it is so tiring!”

“Hon, being able to get that far in half a day is not just good, it’s so incredible that I want to admit you as a full master!” Goldiana exclaimed. “It takes normal people much, much longer just to develop a feel for ki.”

“Really?” Sera seemed to regain her confidence in the blink of an eye. “This training is quite similar to what Viktor taught me, so it’s pretty easy to follow!”

Goldiana smiled. “That’s a good teacher you had. Make sure to thank him properly!”

“You know how long it took me to move on from basic red and discover my color, Violet Fairy?” Grostina cut in, tears of emotion welling up in her eyes. “More than a decade! So what I mean to say is...Sera-chan, you’re just so wonderful!”

Sera smiled wryly. “I’m sure it isn’t *that* big a deal.”

“And Roma-chan, sorry for barging in and borrowing the place on such short notice,” Goldiana said, bowing towards the man sitting at the far end of the dojo.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Roma replied, waving a hand dismissively. “Rather, I should be thanking you. The world-famous Peach Ogre came to my dojo and held a lesson, allowing not only me but also my disciples to watch. I’m sure seeing so many finalists from the Beast King Festival gathered here has been quite a stimulating experience for them.”

“Thank you for saying so, dearie.”

“That said, I see they’re all looking where they’re not supposed to. Perhaps this has been a bit *too* stimulating.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“Are you really going to make me say it? Well, you know...it’s the...chest area. It’s pretty impactful, even behind the gi.”

Two rough, manly voices screamed girlishly as thick arms came up to cover even thicker pecs. The sight was so terrifying that one of the disciples dashed off to the washroom, hands clapped over his mouth. There was one person who leaned forward as if he enjoyed it, but he was definitely the outlier.

“That’s not what I meant. Impactful, true, but no.”

Sera suddenly tilted her head. A curious “Hm?” escaped her lips,

prompting Goldiana to ask, “What happened?”

“Uh...I thought I just felt an incredible power northwest of here. It was like flames from hell...with really fragrant meat sizzling on the grill?”

“That sounds extremely specific, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Well...I’m sure I just imagined it! It’s about time for me to head back.”

Sera’s intuition was, most times, more accurate than even she herself knew. However, her attention had already moved on.

“That’s fine and all, but you’ll be heading out again tonight as soon as Kelvin-chan returns, right? Are you sure you don’t want to take a bath first? You’re all covered with sweat, Sera-chan.”

“Oh, you’re right. You want to join me, Goldiana?”

All the disciples and Dahak shot to their feet with a crash. Roma clutched his head, wondering if this overreaction was due to the abstemious way he ran the school.

“My! What a wonderful idea!” Grostina gushed. “Sister dear, do let’s all go in together! We can have a girls’ party in the hot spring!”

Goldiana, however, did not look as enthusiastic. “We truly appreciate the offer, Sera-chan, but Kelvin-chan might not. Grostina, as those aiming to become the perfect maidens, we have to always look beyond what’s ahead, seeing farther than anyone else.”

“Dear oh dear, how thoughtless of me! Sera-chan, on second thought, I’m afraid I have to harden my heart and say no. You belong to Kelvin-chan, after all!”

“O-Okay. That’s a pity.” Sera accepted the towel being proffered and wiped her sweat with it, blushing slightly from the last thing Grostina had said.

“By the way, where do you plan on going tomorrow?” Goldiana asked. “You’re returning to Parth the day after, aren’t you?”

There were only two days left on this “company trip” that seemed to have lasted so long. It was about time the group ran out of places to visit. However, Sera did not hesitate for a second. Their destination had been decided long ago.

“We’re going to the Village of Elves so that Efil can visit her family!”

“Oh my! That sounds wonderful! I’ve been in Elder Nellas’s care so many times. Tell him I said hi.”

“Will do. Ah, should I wash my gi before returning it?” Sera asked, pulling open the collar of her outfit a little.

Multiple disciples said in unison, “No need! We’ll wash it for you, so just return it as—”

“You can keep it,” Roma interrupted. “Feel free to use it when you

train.”

“SIIIIIRRRRRR!”

This heartrending cry apparently managed to compel a slight loosening in the previously strict, austere lifestyle of the Wild Beast Style School.



After finishing off Diamante in the Cavern of the Divine Beasts, my party headed back to the capital to pick up Sera, then flew to the Village of Elves on the backs of the dragons.

As a visiting gift, we had Divine Pillar meat loaf within Clotho's Storage, a truly one-of-a-kind delicacy. However, we could only travel part of the way by air. When the Forest of Crests drew near, we found a random place to land and switched to walking on foot.

“Brother, why're we walking now?” Dahak asked in a slightly peeved tone. “I could have taken you straight there.”

Did he want to fly more or something? But nah, we can't do that.

“The elves in this village fled here after the Flame Dragon King destroyed their old home. If giant dragons like you or Boga suddenly approached from the sky, it'd give them a fright, to put it mildly.”

The same consideration now had Boga and Mdofarak resting inside my magic pool.

“Whoa, he did that? From what my shitty old man told me, the Flame Dragon King does have a really short fuse.”

Oh right, Dahak's father is the Darkness Dragon King. His home is in Abyssland, a place where demons live. That's where Sera grew up, and it's supposedly underground somewhere in this world. We're visiting Efil's home today, but maybe we should also make time to visit Sera's too. Speaking of which, I wonder if Dahak's father would be willing to fight me if I asked him to.

Rion patted Dahak's back. “Efil-nee doesn't get to come back all that often. Just think of this as a stroll and take in the sights.”

“Might as well, I guess. A little walking never hurt nobody.”

“Thank you, Hak-chan. I'll make you whatever you want afterwards,” Efil promised.

“Brother, I'm going ahead! Right now, I feel like I could walk around the entire world!”

The dragon soon disappeared into the greenery ahead.

Dude, how impatient are you to eat Efil's food? The monsters might not be as vicious anymore now that the Demon Lord is dead, but the barrier around the village should still be in place. If you get too far away, you're gonna get lost.

“What?!” Rion exclaimed indignantly. “Why does only Hak-chan get a snack?! Efil-nee, what about me? I really feel like having a

hamburger patty right now!"

"Then hamburger patty you will have." Efil smiled. "I'll even make you fried shrimp and omelet rice to go with it."

"Really?! Yay! Watch me beat Hak-chan, then!"

After cheekily putting in her menu request, Rion took off after Dahak.

That's basically the standard menu for a child's meal, isn't it? Then again, I suppose we do still treat her like one sometimes. She usually eats whatever is served and isn't picky, so it wouldn't hurt entertaining a little willfulness every once in a while. But where did the talk about enjoying the sights go? When did things turn into a race with Efil's cooking as the prize?

As I gazed in the direction Dahak and Rion had gone with a wry smile on my face, I felt Ange tugging on my sleeve.

"Kelvin, may I join the race too?"

"Seriously? That's a bit immature, isn't it?"

Racing aside, you just have to ask and Efil will make whatever you want! Look at Melfina—she's already gone to Efil in person. As always, our goddess sure is living life to the fullest.



We made our way through the elves' barrier the same way we had last time. The direction we picked was clearly correct as, after a short while, we reached the place just by going straight. The black walls that I had erected with Adamantite Rampart in preparation for repelling the Trycenian attack soon appeared up ahead.

"You there, stop!" shouted a voice from one of the watchtowers.

Wow, *déjà vu*.

"This forest is protected by mag— Wait, is that you, Kelvin-san and Efil-san?!"

"Hey there. It's been a while. Is Elder Nellas in?"

"P-Please wait a moment! I'll bring him out even if I have to drag him myself!"

"Um, we're not in *that* much of a hur—"

"We'll get him out here! Runner! To me, runner!"

"Uh, okay then."

Is it me or is this guy's treatment of the Elder a bit terrible?

"What?! Kelvin-dono came to visit?! And Efil-san is here too?! A feast! Everyone, drop what you're doing! We're having a feast tonight!"

Dude, your voice is so loud, I can hear it on the other side of your village walls. And just how fast do you run? Looks like there was no need to drag you out after all. Though it does seem like a weird switch was flipped inside him.

Boom boom boom!

Right after I heard Nellas's shout, a furious rumbling went up behind the village gate. A sense of foreboding rose within me.

"Thank you for waiting! It's been, what, a few days since we last met? We're already done with the preparations for the feast! What a happy day it is today! Let's drink till dawn!"

"Uh, there was almost no waiting. You pretty much came right out."

Did your personality change again, Nellas-san? I was pretty surprised during the other Beast King Festival, but don't you love alcohol a bit too much? And how on earth could the villagers prepare an entire feast so quickly?!

"The Elder has spoken! Everyone, bring out all the wine and food you have! It's a festival! Tonight's a festival!"

A roar of cheers rose from the village, indicating that the residents were very much looking forward to drinking. The faces that we could see through the open gates all bore broad grins of excitement.

Uh, have the elves always been like this? It's not the Elder who's just an anomaly? I normally only have Efil to interact with, so I'd gained an image of elves as being quiet and modest. All I'm seeing now is a group of people who love festivals way too much. You guys just want an excuse to drink, right? The sun's still high up here!

"You! Make sure that Gerard-dono's stage is ready too!"

"No need to tell me twice, Nellas-san! It's not a proper party without it!"

Huh?! Stop it. Put that back.

Efil giggled. "Everyone looks so happy, Master."

"R-Right, they sure do..."

Naturally, I snapped Efil's angelic smile with my mental camera to commit it to permanent storage, but worry was my dominant feeling at the moment.

That stage and Gerard running his mouth is the main reason my entry in the Adventurer Directory included the stupid lie about me being called "War Poet," right?!

"Well, there's no point chatting out here! Come on in, Kelvin-san. Come on in."

"Thank you. Go easy on me, yeah?"

"What are you saying?! We have to go all out, of course!"

Ugh! You craven, you really do plan on humiliating me after all!

"Coming in!" Rion said cheerfully as she walked past me.

"E-Excuse me, I'm coming in too," Shutola mumbled shyly. "Ah, don't leave me behind, Rion-chan!"

Sera frowned. "Strangely, I don't really remember this place all that well. Was I feeling under the weather or something?"

Gerard cackled. "Oh no, lass, you were in top form!"

Everyone filed into the village, leaving me alone with my worries. The last one to pass me, Efil, turned around and held out a hand. "Let us head inside too, Master."

"Yeeaaaaah. Okay, let's go in."

I headed in with trepidation as Efil pulled me along.



The night deepened. Having somehow weathered the feast held in the village square, I was now taking a small break on top of the wall with Efil and Ange. Just like last time, Sera had been knocked out early on. Rion had tended to her for a while but then soon fell asleep with Shutola. Gerard was still very much in the middle of drinking and merrymaking in the crowd surrounding Elder Nellas. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the speech platform met an untimely demise and was gone without a trace. The cover-up work was perfect.

"I had so much fun!" Ange thrust out both hands, a slight blush and a blissful smile on her face. "I never knew the elves were all so friendly and nice!"

"I suppose you can call them friendly," I laughed. "They're very different now from when we first met them. Maybe this is their natural state."

"I'm glad they liked the meat loaf I made."

"I saw a few of them crying while renouncing vegetarianism." *I'm sure it's fine, right? I mean, it's not like all elves are vegetarians; it's just a minority, really. Efil has no problem eating meat either. Well, let's just say that meat, too, is natural providence. What a convenient term it is, heh.*

"This trip is almost over..." Efil clenched a fist as if to psych herself up. "When we get home, I must first clean every last nook and cranny!"

"Aha ha, you're so diligent, Efil-chan!" Ange giggled.

And the first thing I have to do when I get back is go with Ange to resign from the guild. Ugh, my stomach is hurting just thinking about it.

Just as the atmosphere relaxed, Ange adopted a serious face.

"So...we're returning to Parth through the teleportation gate, right?"

I blinked. "I mean, that's the plan, yes. It's a lot faster than riding the dragons, though I suppose I would have to be wary of the Beast King when we leave."

"There's someone else you should be even more wary of than the Beast King. It's, well...there's something I have to tell you about Guildmaster Rio."

Side Story: The Other Beast King Festival (cont.)

“Kelvin, hang out with me today!”

“That’s a random request...”

I couldn’t remember which day this happened during our stay in Gaun. What I did remember was that I was in the middle of an elegant breakfast, thanking the karma from my usual good deeds for a great morning where I got to wake up peacefully.

All of a sudden, Sera plonked herself into the seat directly across from mine and demanded my time.

“You went to an event with Mel the other day!”

“I did?”

“Don’t play dumb! That day I was stuck in bed all morning with a hangover!”

“Oh, right.”

“Don’t give me your ‘Oh, right’! Mel told me she got to drink and eat a lot and had a ton of fun! That’s so unfair! I wanted to go too!”

That...would’ve been a bit difficult. But Sera will probably get even more huffy if I tell her that. Mel must’ve been referring to “the other Beast King Festival” drinking competition that she participated in the other day. It’s true we went together, but she had all the fun. Anyway, it would have been impossible for Sera to take part when alcohol is one of her weaknesses.

“All right, then let’s hit the town together today!”

“Just saying, I reject your right to reject me! Give up and— Wait, huh? Really? That’s surprisingly compliant of you.”

I mean, I don’t think there’s anything I can say to convince you to do something else. There’s no point resisting, so I might as well just go along with it. I’ve already blocked out time to spend with you, so we would have already gone out if not for the hangover incident. I’ve really been looking forward to it myself, so there’s no reason to turn you down.

“So, since you’re asking, I assume you already have a place in mind? Where are we going?”

“Huh? Uh, I... Hold on! Give me a minute!”

Sera turned around and fumbled with something behind her back. In all likelihood, it was something similar to Mel’s favorite reading material. In short, a travel guide.

“Oh, that’s right! I found a place with a really good vibe the other

day! Let's go there!"

A figurative light bulb seemed to light up over her head at the same time her guide book flew into a mini-Clotho's body. *Nice shot.*

"Sounds good to me. But let me finish my breakfast first. I'm not done yet."

"Oh? Want me to feed you? Efil does it for you every once in a while, doesn't she?"

"Pffft!" I spat out all the water in my mouth and choked violently. *The nice shot from earlier turned into a killer pass that just stabbed me in the heart.*

"Sera, wh-where did you—"

"Heh heh, I can't have you underestimating my detection abilities! I can tell exactly what you're doing even when I can't see you!"

That sounds pretty worrying—no, that's VERY worrying!

"Give up all thoughts of resistance! Come on, I'll feed you!"

In the split second I was so flustered that I let down my guard, she snatched away my wooden spoon.

"Hold on, this is the dining hall of the inn. Let's do this after we get ho—"

"All right, say, 'ah'!"

"Nngh!"

We were right in the middle of the inn's breakfast hours, which meant there were a ton of guests at the tables nearby. Sera was a drop-dead beauty who turned heads wherever she went. By the time she reached my side of the table, many of our neighboring diners were already looking over. And since I had only just started my breakfast, the food on my plate was largely untouched.

"Here's the next one! Say 'ah'!"

The bliss of having Sera feed me by hand coupled with all the gazes—jealous, tender, and everything in between—pressing down on me had turned the room into a unique space that was truly beyond words. Mortification coursed through my veins for an eternity under an untold number of gazes.



After surviving the morning's tribulations, I left the inn with my demon companion. She led me through the streets for about five minutes before we stopped in front of what looked like a café. Due to the hour, we spotted quite a few people having breakfast within.

"Is this it?"

"That's right! Even Goldiana recommends this place!"

I'd been wondering how she'd managed to find such an off-the-beaten-path establishment. I heaved a sigh of relief, thinking, *Ah, then we're safe.* To my surprise, I found myself with a strange sense of faith

in Goldiana's recommendations. *Well, aside from his—ah, her—very impactful appearance, she's a rather reasonable person with a lot of common sense. Maybe it's whiplash from the contrast that's getting to me.*

When Sera pulled me into the café, I found it filled with a very calming atmosphere that even I, as someone who knew nothing about such matters, felt was pleasant. The beastkin clientele I had spied from outside looked very soft and gentle, in sharp contrast with Sabato "Hah! Give me a tavern any day!" Gaun. It was a combination of the shop and customer base that gave the establishment its tranquil air. I can't quite put it into words, but that was the general impression I got.

"Kelvin, you're going to have to be quiet and well-mannered here. Don't cause another scene, okay?"

"Really? *You're telling me that?*"

I had been a little worried about how well the overly energetic Sera would fit this café's mood, but those worries had been unfounded. *Oh, right, Sera's actually quite mindful about etiquette and stuff. Whew, so I don't have to worry about being tortured with embarrassment here.*

"Welcome. Here are your menus."

"Thank you." Without even glancing at the menu, Sera ordered an item with a very alarming name right off the bat. "I'll have the Blood Cake and warm milk. What about you, Kelvin?"

"You decided the instant you sat down?! Um, uh..." *C'mon, that's way too fast. Can you give me some time, please?*

"Well...I just had breakfast, so I want something light."

"In that case, I recommend the pound cake, dearest brother. It comes in small pieces but it's moist and tastes heavenly."

A small finger pointed at a hand-drawn illustration on the menu.

"Oh, really? I guess I'll have that, then... Wait, 'dearest brother'?"

"Ehe he, what a coincidence seeing the two of you here!"

The hand before me was too small to belong to Sera and the voice was too young. My eyes followed the finger to the hand, the hand to the arm, the arm to the face—and I found myself looking at Shutola.

Sera glanced up. "Oh?"

"SHUTO— Mmft!"

I was so surprised that I was about to call out her name in public. However, a hand snaked around from behind and covered my mouth halfway through. The white arm and maid uniform sleeve told me it was Rosalia.

"Master, please keep your voice down within this establishment. Especially when mentioning Shutola-sama by name."

"I admit that was careless of me, but suddenly being hugged by a maid from behind is also going to attract attention, you know?"

"Everything was so sudden that I unfortunately did not have time

to think it through. I suppose we can consider this a draw?”

Although Sera couldn't see it, there was currently a very soft sensation against the back of my head. I appreciated it very much, but there would be hell to pay if Sera found out, so I did my best to keep a straight face. *I am keeping it straight, right?*

“Shutola-samaaaa! I went and ordered already! Wait, huh? Why are Master and Sera-sama here?” Huba popped up cheerfully, naming Shutola out loud just after Rosalia had admonished me for the very same thing. The people around us started whispering furiously.

“Shutola? Is that possibly Trycen's, uh...”

“I don't think so. The girl may be cute and has blonde hair, but I remember Princess Shutola being an adult. I'm sure she just has the same name.”

“Ohhh, that's gotta be it.”

The beastkin in the café had heard Huba loud and clear. Thankfully, Shutola's youthful appearance was effective in convincing everyone they had merely misunderstood.

Rosalia sighed. “I'm very sorry, Master. I'll make sure to properly reeducate Huba later.”

“I'm not really in a position to rebuke her after having nearly made the same mistake myself,” I chuckled wryly. “Go a bit easier on her.”

“Huh? What'd I do?” Huba asked, looking confused.

Rosalia sighed once more. “I swear, you really do turn hopeless when Azgrad isn't around.”

Although she looked active and spirited, Huba was actually a rather huge slacker back at the mansion. That aside, I was really surprised to see Shutola's group at this restaurant. *Rosalia and Huba are probably accompanying her as her guards, which means it was Shutola who wanted to come here?*

“Oh no, were you on a date, dearest brother?” Shutola asked. “If that's the case, then I'm sorry. We'll leave you alo—”

“Hmph! I'm not so small-minded that I need you to be considerate of me, Shutola! Since you're already here, come join us!” Sera puffed out her very impressive chest and invitingly patted the seat next to hers. Her words and actions did not match the personality of the person who had been crying “It's unfair! It's unfair!” all morning.

“Aww, thank you!” Shutola gushed. “Rosalia and Huba, you should come over too!”

While Huba immediately complied with a cheerful “Absolutely!” Rosalia seemed less certain.

“Are you sure, Master?” she asked, looking at me.

“Gotta make every moment of this trip count, right?” I replied.

“Don't be reserved. Go ahead.”

“Understood.” Rosalia bowed before elegantly sliding into a seat. “Excuse me.”

She seemed to have perfectly adopted the mannerisms of a veteran maid, while her colleague was already in the middle of ordering another drink.

It's not like I'll comment on it, this being a trip to relax and all, but seriously, how did these two end up so different?

“Were you guys having breakfast here?” I asked Shutola. “I don’t remember seeing you in the common room at the inn.”

“Yep! Rion-chan shared a book with me that mentioned this place, and it caught my eye.” Shutola tilted her head cutely. “What about you, dearest brother and sister?”

Sera smiled knowingly. “I heard about this place from Goldiana.”

“My! That makes me even more excited to try the food!”

Even Shutola puts stock in Prettia, Inc.? Its value sure seems to be shooting up.

“Oh right, dearest brother, dearest sister, do you have any plans after this?”

“Not really,” Sera admitted. “We were going to think about it while we ate. What about you?”

“Me? There’s an event in the neighborhood that I’ve been hoping to participate in for a while. Now that I have the opportunity, I’m thinking of giving it a try.”

“An event?!” Sera shot to her feet, her eyes sparkling.

Ah, I can tell what she's going to say. Maybe I'm prophetic too?

“Kelvin! We have to do this! To restore my reputation for the one I missed!”

“I’m not sure how it affected your reputation, but su—” Just as I was in the middle of accepting Sera’s request, a certain thought flashed through my mind. *This event is not going to involve alcohol, is it? I don't think it will, since it's Shutola who brought it up. But I should confirm, just in case. The possibility is extremely slim, but I want to know ahead of time if Sera's going to go on a rampage.*

I shot Shutola a glance and tapped into the Network. *Just asking, but this festival—*

::Has nothing whatsoever to do with what you’re worried about. Don’t worry, dearest brother::

Look at that—she beat me to the punch. Hah! Let me just say that I believed in Shutola from the start. There's no way this wise princess would bring up an event related to alcohol in Sera's presence. She might be young, but she's bright enough to know that would grab Sera's interest.

“Mm, yep.” I nodded. “Let’s pay this festival a visit.”

“Yay! We really must!” Sera cried.

Whoa there, weren't you supposed to remain quiet and well-mannered

in here?

“So, Shutola, what exactly do people do at this festival?”

The young girl smiled. “Actually...”



After having had our second breakfast, we made our way through the streets of Gaun with Shutola’s guidance. I was giving her a ride on my shoulders as she held one of Sera’s hands. Rosalia and Huba kept pace slightly behind us.

“Next, turn left into that alleyway!”

“Aye, aye, Princess.”

“Stick to just one ‘aye!’”

“Ayyyyyye.”

I continued going where the voice from above commanded me for the next few minutes. Everyone we passed gave us “Awww” looks, but we ignored them and eventually reached our destination.

“This is the venue? Isn’t it a bit too quiet?”

The building before us was indeed noticeably larger than its neighbors. However, it lacked the bustling liveliness common to the Adventurer’s Guild and inns. The lack of a commotion actually felt somewhat eerie, considering a so-called festival was supposed to be taking place inside.

“There are plenty of people in there,” Shutola assured us. “It’s just that this isn’t the kind of event where people shout and get heated up. Well, there’s no point standing outside. It’s go time, dearest brother! Go!”

The pat on my head served as my launch button. Following the rules that had naturally developed as I continued role-playing Shutola’s transportation, I walked into the building despite my reservations...and immediately realized how wrong I was.

“Whoa, there really are people in here!” I exclaimed. “Quite a lot too!”

Contrary to what the building’s exterior suggested, the place was packed. There were easily more than a hundred people inside, roughly half beastkin and half human, which was a very rare racial distribution to see in Gaun. What’s more, everyone was astonishingly quiet, almost as if they were part of some larger hive mind.

Uh, we are still in Gaun, right? This is such a far cry from the drinking competition the other day.

As for decor, there were several long tables, each flanked on either side by long benches. Multiple sets of a square board and many game pieces dotted those tables at regular intervals.

“So this is the hidden Beast King Festival. A board game competition!”

Indeed, there were many spin-offs of the Beast King Festival that I did not know about. The one I had participated in was the large-scale tournament where everyone in the country who was confident in their physical fighting prowess got together to compete for the title. The one that Melfina and Gerard had participated in was a drinking competition referred to as “the other Beast King Festival,” which truly encapsulated the meaning of the term “festive.” What was about to take place now, however, was a competition of brains and wits, an area considered the farthest removed from the hearty and simpleminded character of the country!

The board game being played seemed, as far as I could tell, to be a cross between chess and shogi. Having never heard of it before, I could not participate and therefore would be merely spectating once again. However, I kind of felt like whoever was arranging the competition had chosen the wrong country for it.

I'm sure you could have gotten a lot more traction anywhere else on the continent.

Shutola did an energetic little hop. “I’m so excited for this! I couldn’t join the fighting tournament, but I can participate in this!”

Forget getting to play, I suspect our genius princess will have a clean sweep.

Sera nodded. “All right, since I’ve learned the rules, I’m off to sign up as a participant.”

“Huh?! You what? But all you did was read through the rule book Shutola lent you. You just flipped through it back at the café!”

“Don’t underestimate me, Kelvin. It’s true that I only read it for a short period of time. However, I was concentrating that much harder on it!”

Even so, that doesn’t change the fact that you’re a beginner, right? Then again, Sera picks everything up pretty much with the snap of a finger, so I can’t rule out the possibility of her miraculously showing up as a dark horse.

“Okay, if you say so. I’ll be cheering you on from the spectator seats. Do your best and aim for gold!”

“Don’t you dare miss a second of my path to victory!”

“Oh, wait for me, dearest sister Sera. I’m going to the reception too.”

The pair ran off energetically.

“Don’t get lost!” I shouted after them before turning to the others. “Should we head to the spectator area?”

“Masteeer, may I buy some snacks to eat while watching?”

“You *just* ate, Huba. But sure, I guess. If you still have the appetite for it.”

“Breakfast is breakfast, snacking is snacking. Different stomachs!

Since it's a festival, I want to enjoy it to the fullest!"

"You never change, do you?" Rosalia sighed. "Very well, Master and I will secure seats. Come join us afterwards, Huba."

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am!"

The maid in the miniskirt shot towards an area lined with food stalls with an alacrity rarely seen while she was working. She looked just as energetic as the two who had taken off a moment before.

"I can't help feeling bad for Azgrad, imagining what he must have gone through."

"In her defense, she was always the very picture of diligence whenever she was with Azgrad. Though you might not believe it from how she's acting right now..."

I guess that just goes to show how powerful love is. Or maybe not, given the unspoken implication that she slacked off when she was out of Azgrad's sight.

Without further ado, Rosalia and I headed to the area set aside for spectators. A short while later, Huba rejoined us, both hands bearing hearty meat skewers. Although being able to pack away so much food in her slender form would normally be considered an impressive feat, due to Mel's influence, I found myself thinking, *Oh, that's a pretty modest amount. Is that an appetizer?* Sometimes, I honestly worried if our family had gone beyond the point of no return and what would become of us.

Soon enough, a familiar voice rang out, interrupting the chat that we were having in the spectator seats.

"Come one, come all! Here we are at this event for the very limited number of Gaun's intellectuals, the Beast King Game Master Competition! The quiet tension in the air here seems so out of place in Gaun! However, I, Ronove, the official announcer of the Gaun Mixed Fighting Arena, will choose to ignore the atmosphere and deliver my commentary with my usual passion and excitement! If you have complaints and want to make a claim, please direct it to the organizing committee led by the head honcho running this country, His Majesty Beast King Leonhart Gaun!"

Oh, hey, Ronove's commentating for this festival too? That's a bit surprising. I see many people grimacing after her entrance, but I doubt any of them would actually submit a claim. It's not worth getting the attention of the Beast King. I totally understand that.

"All participation applications at reception are over as of this moment. After tallying all the names, including the last-minute jump-ins, we have...exactly 128 people! That's right, 128! What a coincidence! That's the exact number we need for a tournament!"

You just capped the number of participation slots at 128, didn't you?

"A tournament of 128 people!" Huba exclaimed. "To be the

champion, you'd have to win, uh...six times? Seven?"

"Seven," Rosalia replied. "It appears we're here for the long haul."

"Whoa, that does sound like it'll take ages. I can't bring myself to like the game. I'd probably give up after one match, even if I won."

Quitting after one match might be a bit early, but if I think of this in terms of shogi, then seven consecutive matches... Yeah, that's gotta be tough. I don't know how long one match takes, but if it were shogi, there's no way they'd finish in a day.

As if answering my thoughts, Ronove announced, "Although today's event is being held in the style of a tournament, in the interest of expediency, all matches before the semifinals will be allotted a shorter period of time than usual. Don't get impatient, stay calm, and bring your A game!"

"Ah, that makes sense." I nodded. "I hope Sera's all right..."

"Are you not worried about Shutola, Master?" Rosalia asked.

"If this were a fighting tournament, then I'd be as worried as Gerard can get. But there's no need to worry about this game, is there?"

"None at all," both maids replied at the same time.

Wow, perfect harmonizing.

"Well then! Since we're short on time, let's move things along! All participants should have received a numbered slip upon signing up at reception, and we have a brackets chart with the matchups all assigned at random. That's right! With how smart everyone here is, I'm sure you've already figured it out: the chart was made beforehand! Here it is!"

As Ronove gestured towards the stage, a hanging banner that was rolled up near the ceiling slowly unfurled. Sure enough, it was the brackets chart for the tournament.

"Ugh, there are only numbers on the thing," I groaned. "I didn't ask the two what numbers they got. Now how am I supposed to tell where they are?"

Rosalia tilted her head. "Can't you just ask them through the Network, Master?"

"Oh, right."

"You sometimes forget the most obvious things!" Huba chortled.

I don't want to hear that from Huba, of all people! But never mind. Time to get asking.

::What? My number? I'm 77::

::I signed up after dearest sister Sera, so I'm 78::

Got it. With that in mind, time to take another look at the brackets chart... Hmm, I see.

"The two of them are quite far apart," I told my companions.

"There's no risk of them bumping into each other early on."

Huba sighed with relief as Rosalia said, "I'm glad to hear it."

Now I know where Sera and Shutola are. But I have no information on the rest of the participants from this chart alone.

As I continued staring at the numbers, a buzz ran through the venue which, aside from Ronove, had remained quiet all this time.

"Hm? What's happening?"

"A favorite for the championship has appeared, it seems."

"Master, over there!"

I looked up as the other spectators murmured among themselves.

"He's actually here! Is he going to make it to the final match again?"

"He ended up finishing second last year, but I heard he's done a ton of research and training since!"

Hey, the audience really likes this guy. I wonder who it is.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the tournament floor is all aflutter, and for good reason! After all, the one participant everyone's been looking out for has finally arrived! Let's give him a proper introduction! I present to you the runner-up of last year's Beast King Game Master Competition, Kilto Gaun!"

"Although Goma couldn't make it, I'll do my utmost for her sake! GOMAAA! I hope you're watching me with your mind's eye from the castle!"

"Wow, looks like you get as emotionally unstable when it comes to Goma-sama as ever, Kilto-sama!"

Th-That's my comrade, Kilto! Why is he... No, it all makes sense when I think about it. Comrade Kilto possesses one of the most brilliant minds in Gaun. Of course he's good at a game of strategy. But hold on, if he was only the runner-up last year, who could have beat him? The Beast King?

"Everyone, silence, please! It's finally time for the entrance of last year's Beast King Game Master Competition champion!"

Everyone present gulped audibly. If they had been in suspense when Kilto showed up, I thought I could now hear all their heartbeats. It was making me tense up too.

"Once again, he's made the journey all the way from the Village of Elves! Last year's champion, the man who invented this game after securing a stable living and finding himself with too much time on his hands, a maverick of mavericks, a god of the world of games! Ladies and gentlemen, give it up for the representative of the Village of Elves, Elder Nellaas!"

The building shook with passionate cheering from all the participants and spectators who had maintained a dignified silence until mere moments ago.

I brought a hand to my head. "That's strange. I feel like I saw this scene just a few days ago..."

“Are you perhaps so tired that you’re imagining it, Master?” Rosalia asked in a concerned tone, looking up from the tournament pamphlet she had picked up earlier.

“A lot did happen these past few days,” Huba offered.

That’s true. But damn, Nellas apparently has as many talents as the number of things I went through. Seriously, what the hell are you doing, Nellas?!

“That man is apparently the one who developed this game several decades ago and is responsible for spreading its popularity,” Rosalia informed me as she continued going through the pamphlet. “I suppose that’s why he’s so good at it.”

I hope there isn’t a punch line where Elder Nellas turns out to be a transmigrator too. Given how close he got to Mel in the drinking competition, he’s clearly not someone to be underestimated!

“That said, this tournament doesn’t have seeding, so both Nellas-sama and Kילו-sama will be participating from round one just like everyone else. By the way, Nellas-sama’s number is 7 and Kילו-sama’s number is 50. Looks like the tournament is peaking for their respective opponents right off the bat! Go for broke!”

A scream of despair sounded from somewhere in the venue—in all likelihood, it was either Nellas’s or Kילו’s opponent. *They’re so lucky, being guaranteed a game with someone they can learn so much from. As for Sera and Shutola... Aww, they’re out of luck. They have to reach the semifinals to have the honor.*

“Round one will begin in ten minutes sharp. Here is the seating chart. All participants, go to the toilet and make any other preparations you need to. If you aren’t in your seat at the starting time, we won’t wait for you!”

The people in the venue began milling around all at once. Sera was easy to spot, even from a distance, due to her conspicuous red hair and incredible presence. Similarly, although Shutola was small, all the well-mannered intellectuals around took care not to bump into her. Consequently, I only had to look for where people were separating like a wave to figure out her location.

Huba got up. “Master, I’m stepping away too!”

More food? Or maybe using the bathroom? “Don’t get lost in the crowd,” I replied, nodding my permission. A few minutes later, I murmured, “It’s almost time, right?”

“I believe so, yes,” Rosalia replied. “The commentator should be announcing it soon.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is now time! Please check if your opponent is properly seated across from you. If not, feel free to declare a win by default right now!” Ronove paused, but the room remained quiet. “All right, I’ll take that as a no! Since all participants

are properly at the starting line, I'm gonna go ahead and claim the honor of the first shout! ROUND ONE, START!"

A chorus of "Let's have a good match" filled the air as all the participants bowed their heads.

Clack, clack...

Clack...

Clack!

Clack...

"Okay, if I can be honest...this is pretty boring to watch from afar."

"In your case, Master, perhaps part of that feeling is because you aren't familiar with the rules."

I even felt bad about talking in this absolute silence. *Then again, it's not like I have anything else to do. I guess I might as well watch Sera's and Shutola's matches through the Network.*

"I-I've lost."

"Will you look at that?! The tournament's very first victor has appeared! How fast! It's way too fast! The one who's proceeded to the next round is...number 78! What a surprise! It's neither Kילו-sama nor Nellas-sama! That honor has gone to the little girl of number 78!"

"I'm first up? Yay!"

Completely overturning everyone's expectations, it was Shutola who had finished her match first.

"I still can't believe it... How can I lose? To such a young girl, no less!"

Shutola's opponent, a scholarly beastkin, seemed at a complete loss. *Is he one of Comrade Kילו's subordinates? Either way, I'm sorry, man. You just had really bad luck of the draw today.*

"Oh? Someone interesting's showed up."

"Heh heh, maybe this year will be more fun than ever."

"Aaaand right on the heels of number 78, Kילו-sama and Nellas-sama have also won their matches!"

Did those two just mutter generic tournament arc spectator lines? Not that I heard it, but I have a feeling they did.

"As expected, Shutola is doing great," I commented.

"And she appears to be having fun as well," Rosalia agreed. "I couldn't be happier."

"Sera, on the other hand..." I peeked at her view, expecting her to crow in victory at any moment now that a few of the other pairs were finishing up as well. "Surprisingly, she's still in the middle of it."

"She is a beginner, after all. I imagine the veterans will be quite the match for her, considering her lack of experience."

"Maybe."

Although I could not understand the state of the game based on

the pieces on the board, I could see that Sera's opponent had a frown on his face and appeared quite deep in thought. From that, I determined the match was even so far; whoever won would probably do so with only a slight lead.

Sure enough, a while later, Sera's opponent admitted, "I have no more moves. Ugh, I was so close..."

Sera, for her part, simply had her arms crossed and looked thoughtful. She did not leap with celebration the way I'd expected.

"All right, that's all the matches for round one completed!" Ronove announced. "By the way, I just want to say this on the record: it's really, really tough not being able to commentate while the matches are going on! Ahem. So then, those who won, congratulations! Those who lost, I'm sorry! It's time for you to leave the venue with your tails between your legs!"

Half the participants shuffled out obediently. As it turned out, Gaun's culture of "the one who wins is in the right" applied here as well; no mercy was shown to the losers whatsoever.

"Whew, it's now so much less stuffy in here! Without further ado, it's time to start round two! What? A break? You don't get breaks on a battlefield, do you?! You'll get a short break between rounds two and three, so if you really have to go, either desperately claw for that victory or throw away your pride and surrender. With that said, everyone move to your positions!"

"What an unreasonable announcement..."

"That just goes to show how pressed for time they are. But speaking of stepping away, where on earth is Huba and what could she be doing?"

The tournament continued and Huba never returned. Our beloved genius princess, my comrade who loved his little sister as much as I did mine, and the maverick elven Elder all handily blazed through the rounds. Despite her matches being very close, Sera also managed to reach the top four.

"Knowing what she's like, I'd expected Sera to get quite far. But winning this many games as a complete beginner is just incredible."

"She must have a truly exceptional knack for it."

The brackets for the semifinal matches were decided, and as expected by the crowd, Nellas and Kilto claimed two of the spots. As expected by my group, the third spot belonged to Shutola. The fourth was Sera's, which had been a complete surprise even to us.

Damn, how do I even begin to guess who'll win here?

"Thank you for being patient with us, ladies and gentlemen! It's finally time for what you were really looking forward to: the semifinals! But before that, let me introduce the valiant warri—sorry, the valiant sages who have made it this far! Going in order of their

numbers, we have number 7! Elder Nellas, the favorite for the championship! Never once has he yielded his throne since the start of the Beast King Game Master Competition!”

Not even once? The old man’s way more incredible than I thought.

“Next, number 50! Prince Kilty, he who shoulders the hopes of all beastkin pursuing the scholarly arts and is expected to carry the mantle of the next generation Game Master champion! Although he’s joined this tournament since his youth, he’s always remained one step short of reaching the top! Will he finally be able to vindicate his honor this year?!”

Personally, I’m secretly supporting Kilty too. Why, you ask? C’mon, don’t make me spell it out.

“Then we have number 77! Sera, who’s managed to climb all this way on consecutive close matches won with a paper-thin difference! Wait, you’re a participant in the real Beast King Festival, aren’t you?! What’re you doing here?! It’s said that heaven does not give with both hands, so what’s with her?! She’s got brawn, brains, *and* beauty! That’s so unfair!”

That last part isn’t commentary but your personal take, right? If you’re gonna go there, you should probably complain about Nellas too—he’s clearly got a lot of talents.

“Last but not least is number 78! Just who is this master who has been blazing through the rounds with her overwhelming prowess?! A famous mage? A renowned scholar? No, no, no! Listen and be surprised, because she’s a charming young lady who’s been playing all her matches with her adorable teddy bear in hand! Suffice it to say this tournament has never seen such a dark horse! She’s asked to remain anonymous, so her name’s a total secret! The mystery only deepens!”

Oh, you can participate in this tournament without giving your name? But doing so makes you even more conspicuous...

“Finally, on to what everyone’s dying to know: the matchups for the semifinals! First, the grandmaster, Nellas, versus the red beauty, Sera! The pervert with a little sister fetish, Kilty, versus the mysterious little girl who’s asked to remain anonymous!”

Isn’t your introduction of Kilty a bit harsh?! Granted, it’s sort of correct, but still!

“Please go easy on me, Sera-san.”

“Why would I do that? I want to give it all I’ve got.”

“Ha ha ha, no mercy for an old man, I see. However, I *am* the inventor of this game. I have no intention of losing either.”

The brief exchange before the match already had sparks flying between Sera’s and Nellas’s eyes. At the same time, Shutola and Kilty appeared to be saying something to each other.

“You’re very impressive, reaching this point at such a young age. That said, I’m confident I would have achieved the same even if I was your age.”

“You must be someone who really hates losing.”

“When it comes to a field that I’m confident in, I do hate losing, even if it’s a game. I will neither let down my guard nor go easy. I hope you’re ready.”

“Just the way I want it!”

Looks like things are heating up on this side too. I suppose we can expect a good match from—

“By the way, do you perhaps have an older sibling?”

“Mm-hm, I do. Why?”

“Ahh, I knew it. You have incredible little sister energy. I could tell from one look. Mm, you are a good little sister.”

“Uh...should I say thank you?”

That’s probably not the right response, Shutola. But my comrade sure has a perceptive eye. I can’t help but be impressed. Of course, Rion is still number one.

“All the participants are fired up, which means we should get started right now! The semifinals get double the time allotted to the earlier matches! Feel free to enjoy the game to your utmost! And without further ado: Ready... START!”

Four voices said, “Let’s have a good match” in unison.

Clack, clack...

“I suppose it’s not like the game is going to change just because we’re in the semifinals now,” I muttered.

“Well, that is the game. On the board, however, the back-and-forth is so intense it is practically a slugfest. These are truly incredible matches.”

So, Rosalia knows how to play? Then again, even Huba does, so I suppose it makes sense. Sadly, I’m still in the dark. I can feel how passionate everyone is, but my own heart isn’t beating any faster. I’d really appreciate it if Ronove could commentate on how the games are going, but she’s been pretty careful about staying quiet while the matches are going on, probably to avoid ruining the players’ concentration. Ugh, what a model of a commentator!

“I didn’t see that coming... How about this?!”

“Then I’ll do this.”

“What?! You ignored my move?!”

Both Shutola and Kilto were having a great time, as was everyone else who was watching.

Gah, I feel so out of place. I swear I’m going to learn the rules when I get back to the inn today!

“Aren’t you going to do something about this side?”

“Huh?!”

Shutola and Kilto started exchanging banter in this way halfway through their match. Thanks to their reactions, even a complete beginner like me could sort of tell who was gaining the advantage. Now that the duration of the game was doubled, it ended up being quite long, but it seemed to me like they were fast approaching their endgame.

“I...no longer have a way out. I surrender,” Kilto eventually admitted, putting down the piece he had lifted.

“Kilto Gaun has surrendered!” Ronove immediately shouted as if she had been counting down to this moment. “As a result, the anonymous young girl moves on to the championship match! Who could have predicted this huge upset?!”

Phew, glad to see Shutola taking the win again. Ah, her banter with Comrade Kilto kind of stole my attention halfway through and I stopped looking at Sera's game. How is she do—

“I see, so a match can develop this way too. Just learned something new again.”

“Huh? Dearest sister Sera? Uh... Huh?!”

For some reason, Sera was standing right next to Shutola and Kilto's table and observing their match up close with no one having noticed her up until that moment. Everyone, including me, gave a start.

“Whoa, what's this?” Ronove exclaimed. “Sera-sama is watching this mat— Um, Sera-sama, what's happened to your own game? Your timer is ticking down!”

“It was over a while ago. Nellas wants to keep going until the timer runs out, so I came over to watch instead of calling it.”

“I-Is that true?!”

Surprise swept through the venue. When we turned to look at Sera and Nellas's board, we found Nellas desperately racking his brain as sweat beaded his forehead.

“Sera-san...”

“Hm? Have you made your decision?”

Upon being called by Nellas, Sera returned to her seat.

You sure are free-spirited.

“Indeed I have. I cannot describe how astonished I am at all the new moves you have shown me. You have the creativity to think outside the box and the deftness to realize your ideas. I take my hat off to you. I knew this moment would come someday, but to think that day is today... Sera-san, please take my title as grandmaster. I acknowledge that you have the ability to shoulder the next generation. I surrender.”

Ronove gasped. “Nellas-sama has just announced his surrender!

The god of games has finally been struck down!”

The building rattled from the loudest blast of cheering it had heard so far.

“Wow, Sera actually won,” I murmured.

“What a surprise, right?” Rosalia replied. “And now the pairing for the final match has been decided. This is going to be a fight that goes down in history!”

Uh, am I imagining it? Rosalia still looks as cool as a cucumber, but she’s actually really excited right now, isn’t she?

“The final round of this year’s Beast King Game Master Competition is! Between! Sera! And! Anonymous! Now that we’ve come this far, let’s continue rolling along on that wave of momentum! Cry and laugh all you like; this is undoubtedly the very last match! ‘It’s just a game?’ ‘Just playing around?’ Shut it, none of that matters now! Show us the greatest entertainment ever!”

Wow, they’re already starting. Gaun seriously does everything based on momentum.

“Dearest sister Sera, let’s have a good match.”

“Of course we will. I knew you’d make it this far!”

“Me too. You weren’t trying your best up until the semifinals, were you? Instead, you were using this tournament to practice. That’s why you purposely played slow and didn’t overwhelm your opponents, keeping the scores as close as possible to prevent them from surrendering.”

“Oh, you could tell? We had a similar game where I grew up, and I beat Viktor at it so many times. However, there were some significant differences between the two games, so I wanted to familiarize myself with this one as much as possible.”

“I can’t wait to get started! I’ve only ever gotten serious while playing Colette-chan. It’s time I get serious again. Dearest sister Sera, let’s play!”

“Heh heh, challenge accepted!”

And with that, the curtains rose on a truly furious and mind-blowing match that went down in history.



“Waaaaah! I can’t believe that just happened! It sucks!”

The setting sun illuminated our path as we made our way from the tournament venue back to our inn. The person wailing with heartfelt regret while latched onto my back was Sera. As was obvious from her reaction, she had lost to Shutola, albeit by a very narrow margin. This year’s Beast King Game Master Competition had ended with Shutola as the champion.

“Ha ha, you had to let go of the grandmaster title pretty much as

soon as you got it," I chuckled.

"I...am...num...ber...one!" Shutola sang repeatedly with pride, skipping along.

"Ugh! I promise I'll beat you next year!"

I can tell through the Network that Sera is feeling really crushed. On the other hand, Shutola is loving that trophy in her arms. And I'm not sure, but I think Rosalia is feeling really proud of her right now.

"Huba never came back, did she? Where could she have gone?"

"I'm here, Master!" A maid in a miniskirt suddenly popped out from a side street.

What is this, a prank video?

"And I'm with her!" Rion cried as she popped out too.

Shutola's eyes widened. "Huh? Rion-chan?"

"I'm sure there's a lot you want to say, but first come with me!"

Rion grabbed one of Shutola's arms and started pulling her along.

Rosalia and I exchanged puzzled looks, then followed them, eventually ending up at...our inn.

"Shutola-chan, congratulations on the championship!"

A countless number of dishes laden with food were all laid out before us, with birthday-like decorations hung up everywhere. Beside Rion stood Efil, Ruka, and Huba. Actually, scratch that—everyone was present.

"Huh? Huuuh?!" Shutola was flabbergasted.

Even our genius princess failed to see this coming, huh?

"We started preparing this morning after Huba told me you were joining a large competition!" Rion said proudly.

"Heh heh, this is a surprise from us!" Huba added.

In other words, these two are behind the commemorative celebration.

"Ahhh." I nodded with understanding. "I did think it kind of weird that Rion wasn't coming along to cheer for Shutola."

"I thought about asking you to help too, Kel-nii, but you all went in a group. So we decided to surprise you too. I'm sorry for lying to you, Shutola-chan, saying that I had something to do today."

"R-Rion-chaaaan! Thank youuuu!"

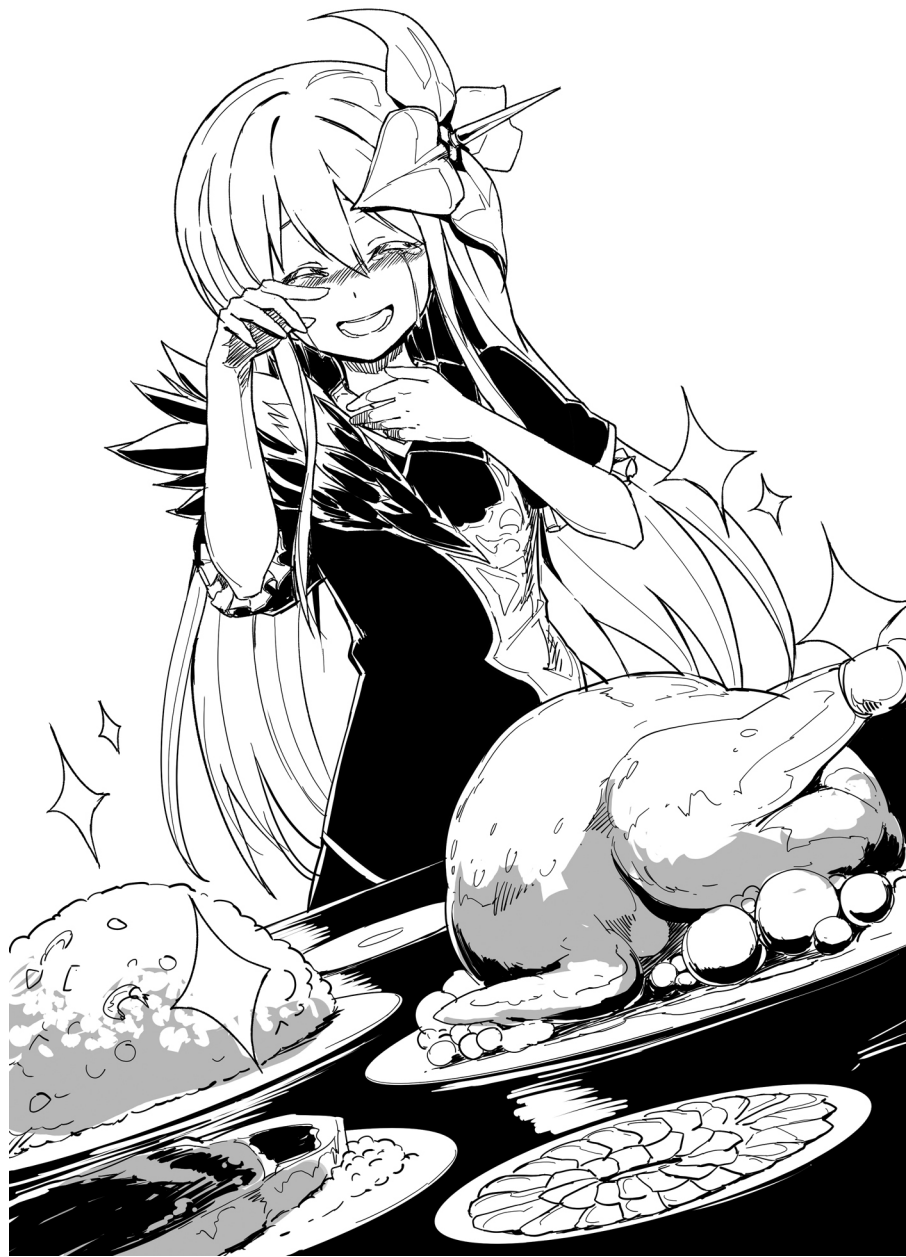
"Oh no! Don't cry, Shutola-chan!"

Awww, their friendship is so beautiful. This sight would have been even more beautiful without the suit of armor choking up with tears in the background, though.

"Hey, this all looks delicious."

"You think so too, Sera? I'm already on my fourteenth plate."

Before I knew it, Sera had dropped off my back, fully recovered. She was enjoying herself next to Melfina, who was, as usual, busily stuffing food into her mouth.



Afterword

Thank you so much for purchasing *Black Summoner 7: The Creeping Darkness*. As always, I'm low on page space for the afterword, so I'll be forgoing my introduction again.

This seventh volume corresponds to the latter half of Arc 6: *Beast King Festival* from the web novel. We see the rest of the tournament, every fight more intense than the last. Behind the scenes, a suspicious group seemingly up to no good is introduced, and after a whole commotion, a new heroine joins Kelvin's party. Between you and me, I didn't originally plan on having her join him—after a fierce and intense fight, she would, you know... However, the me from that time suddenly changed his mind, as I always tend to, and now I'm glad that he did.

On a different topic, the release date of this book coincides with the release date of the latest volume of the manga adaptation as well as volume 1 of a brand-new series I'm working on, *Black Iron Magician*. Please check them out. The manga drawn by Gin Ammo-sensei depicts Kelvin and his family in action very dynamically, and the new series has a battle junkie different from Kelvin also going wild and having a blast in his own world!

With that, I hereby leave *Black Summoner* in everyone's warm hands, praying that we will meet again next volume.

Doufu Mayoi

■ KELVIN CELSIUS

■ 23 Y/O / MALE / DAEMON/ SUMMONER

■ LEVEL: 126

■ TITLE: GRIM REAPER

■ HP: 2,016/2,016

■ MP: 18,900/18,900 (+12,600)

SUMMONING CLOTHO: MAX MP - 100

SUMMONING GERARD: MAX MP - 1,000

SUMMONING SERA: MAX MP -1,000

SUMMONING MEL (ARTIFICIAL BODY):

MAX MP -5

SUMMONING ALEX: MAX MP -320

SUMMONING DAHAK: MAX MP -500

SUMMONING BOGA: MAX MP -500

SUMMONING MDOFARAK: MAX MP -500

■ STRENGTH: 1,253 (+640)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,182 (+640)

■ AGILITY: 1,451

■ MAGIC: 2,934 (+640)

■ LUCK: 1,910

■ EQUIPMENT

BLACK DISASTER (RANK S)

BLACK SWORD AKLAMA

(RANK S)

ASTARTE'S EMBRACE (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

MAD HOLY SWORD CLIVE (RANK S)

SKILL EATER (RANK S)

BLOOD PENDANT (RANK S)

TAILORED BLACK LEATHER BOOTS

(RANK C)

■ SKILLS

MAGIC OVERCLOCK (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

SCYTHE MASTERY (RANK S)

GREEN MAGIC (RANK S)

ANALYZE EYE (RANK S)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK A)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK A)

SMITHING (RANK S)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

EXPERIENCE SHARING

PARALLEL PROCESSING (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

SUMMONING (RANK S)

[AVAILABLE SLOTS: 2]

WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK A)

SPIRIT (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK S)

DOUBLE EXPERIENCE POINTS

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE GODDESS OF REINCARNATION

SKILL EATER (RIGHT)/FARSIGHT (RANK S)

SKILL EATER (LEFT)/DUAL WIELD (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ EFIL

■ 16 Y/O / FEMALE / HIGH ELF / BATTLE MAID

■ LEVEL: 125

■ TITLE: BOMBING PRINCESS

■ HP: 1,163 / 1,163

■ MP: 3,637 / 3,637

■ STRENGTH: 528

■ ENDURANCE: 525

■ AGILITY: 3,440 (+640)

■ MAGIC: 2,739 (+640)

■ LUCK: 1,862 (+1,600)

■ EQUIPMENT

PENUMBRA (RANK S)

MERCILESS (RANK S)

BATTLE MAID UNIFORM V (RANK S)

BATTLE MAID HEADRESS V (RANK S)

MAGICAL JEWEL HAIR CLIP (RANK B)

BLESSED SLAVE COLLAR (RANK A)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

FLAME DRAGON LEATHER BOOTS (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

BLUE FLAME (UNIQUE SKILL)

ARCHERY (RANK S)

RED MAGIC (RANK S)

COVERT ACTION (RANK S)

SERVICE (RANK S)

COOKING (RANK S)

SEWING (RANK S)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE FLAME

DRAGON KING

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

DIVINE RESTITUTION (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK C)

FARSIGHT (RANK S)

TEACHING (RANK A)

MASSAGE (RANK A)

DISCERNMENT (RANK S)

CLEANING (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS



■ CLOTHO

■ O Y / O / GENDERLESS / SLIME GLUTTONIA

■ LEVEL: 125

■ TITLE: EVERLASTING DARKNESS

■ HP: 2,520 / 2,520 (+100)

■ MP: 1,999 / 1,999 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,520 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,468 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 1,479 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 1,240 (+100)

■ LUCK: 1,349 (+100)



■ EQUIPMENT

NONE

■ SKILLS

GLUTTONY (UNIQUE SKILL)

METALICIZE (RANK S)

ABSORPTION (RANK A)

DIVISION (RANK A)

DISMANTLE (RANK S)

STORAGE (RANK S)

BLUNT DAMAGE INVULNERABILITY

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING / MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

■ GERARD

■ 138 Y/O / MALE / HADES KNIGHT CAPTAIN / DARK KNIGHT

■ LEVEL: 127

■ TITLE: SWORD GURU

■ HP: 13,324/13,324 (+8,816) (+100)

■ MP: 548/548 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 2,905 (+640) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 3,048 (+640) (+100)

■ AGILITY: 520 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 412 (+100)

■ LUCK: 670 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

DEMON SWORD DAINSEIF (RANK S)

DREADNOUGHT (RANK A)

CRIMSON MANTLE (RANK B)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

GLORY WITHIN MINE HANDS

(UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

RIDING (RANK S)

MILITARY TACTIC (RANK B)

AUTO HEALING (RANK S)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK S)

MATERIALIZATION

SLICING DAMAGE RESISTANCE

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE

(UNIQUE SKILL)

ANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

ARMORED SKIN (RANK S)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK A)

TEACHING (RANK A)

FORTITUDE (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK S)

DARK DAMAGE RESISTANCE

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE/DEMON SWORD DAINSEIF++

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE/DREADNOUGHT++

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE/CRIMSON MANTLE++

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE/GODDESS'S RING++

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ SERA

■ 21 Y/O / FEMALE / DEMON BLOOD LORD / CURSED PUGILIST

■ LEVEL: 126

■ TITLE: EMPRESS

■ HP: 3,234/3,234 (+100)

■ MP: 3,407/3,407 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,855 (+320) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,257 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 1,450 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 1,983 (+320) (+100)

■ LUCK: 2,295 (+640) (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

ARONDIGHT (RANK S)

QUEEN'S TERROR (RANK S)

CLIP OF CAMOUFLAGE (RANK A)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

STRENGTHENED MITHRIL GREAVES (RANK B)

■ SKILLS

BLOOD DOMINION (UNIQUE SKILL)

BLOODBENDING (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

BLACK MAGIC (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK A)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK S)

SERVICE (RANK C)

DANCING (RANK A)

MUSICAL PERFORMANCE (RANK A)

FISHING (RANK A)

AUTO HEALING (RANK S)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK A)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK A)

SUPER LUCK (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE DEMON LORD

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ MEL (ARTIFICIAL BODY)

■ 17 Y/O / FEMALE / ANGEL / VALKYRIE

■ LEVEL: 126

■ TITLE: THE SMILE

■ HP: 3,674~4,235 (+3,289~3,850)

■ MP: 3,674~4,235 (+3,289~3,850)

■ STRENGTH: 3,674~4,235 (+3,548~4,109)

■ ENDURANCE: 3,674~4,235 (+3,548~4,109)

■ AGILITY: 3,674~4,235 (+3,548~4,109)

■ MAGIC: 3,674~4,235 (+3,548~4,109)

■ LUCK: 3,674~4,235 (+3,548~4,109)

■ EQUIPMENT

HOLY SPEAR LUMINARY (RANK S)

VALKYRIE MAIL (RANK S)

VALKYRIE HELM (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

ETHER GREAVES (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

DIVINE BINDING (HIDDEN SKILL)

SYMPATHETIC RESONANCE (UNIQUE SKILL)

SPEAR MASTERY (RANK S)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

BLUE MAGIC (RANK S)

WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK S)

MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK S)

ACCESSORY CRAFTSMANSHIP (RANK S)

ALCHEMY (RANK S)

HEARTY EATING (RANK S)

STEEL STOMACH (RANK S)

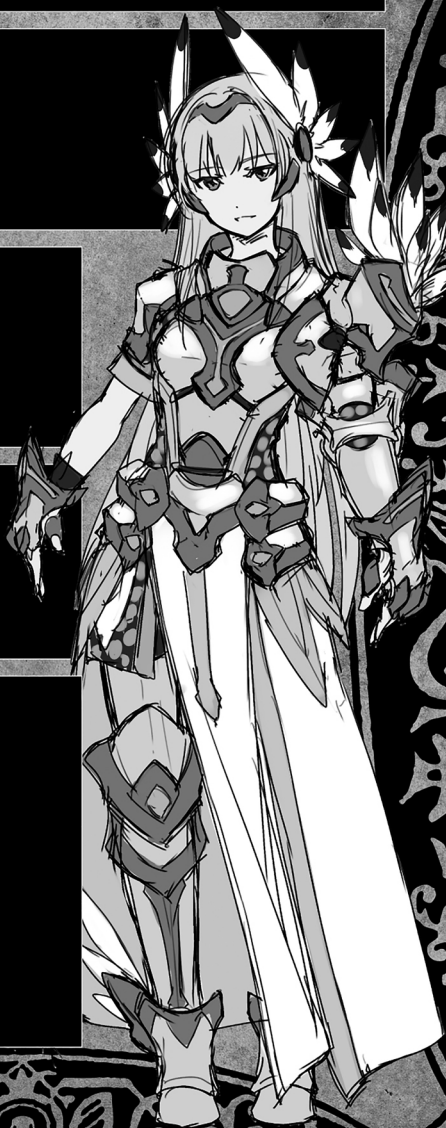
GUSTATION (RANK S)

OLFACTION (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/ MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ RION CELSIUS

■ 14 Y/O / FEMALE / HUMAN / SWORD SAINT

■ LEVEL: 122

■ TITLE: BLACK METEOR

■ HP: 1,583 / 1,583

■ MP: 2,567 / 2,567

■ STRENGTH: 1,414

■ ENDURANCE: 715 (+320)

■ AGILITY: 2,967 (+640)

■ MAGIC: 2,313 (+640)

■ LUCK: 1,462

■ EQUIPMENT

DEMON SWORD CALADBOLG (RANK S)

FAUX HOLY SWORD WILL (RANK A)

BLACK SWORD AKLAMA (RANK S) X 2

BLACK RECESS (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

TAILORED BLACK LEATHER BOOTS (RANK C)

■ SKILLS

RESIDUAL SLICE

(UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

ACROBATICS (RANK S)

SKY WALK (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

PAINTING (RANK B)

EMPATHY (RANK B)

VIGOR (RANK S)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

ABSOLUTE PURIFICATION

(UNIQUE SKILL)

DUAL WIELD (RANK S)

COVERT ACTION (RANK S)

RED MAGIC (RANK S)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK A)

COMPANIONSHIP (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK A)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT

(RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ ALEX

■ 3 Y/O / MALE / HRÓÐVITNIR

■ LEVEL: 122

■ TITLE: HEAT HAZE

■ HP: 2,215 / 2,215 (+100)

■ MP: 824 / 824 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,412 (+320) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 907 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 1,109 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 658 (+100)

■ LUCK: 595 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

LETHAL OPIATE SWORD

(RANK S)

GODDESS'S COLLAR

(RANK S)

■ SKILLS

SHADOW TRAVEL (UNIQUE SKILL)

CREEPING DARKNESS (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

ACROBATICS (RANK S)

OLFACTION (RANK S)

COVERT ACTION (RANK A)

CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK B)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK A)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

■ DAHAK

■ 162 Y/O / MALE / BLACK DRAGON (ANCIENT) / FARMER

■ LEVEL: 121

■ TITLE: GIANT FARMER

■ HP: 2,569/2,569 (+100)

■ MP: 640/640 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,245 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 968 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 611 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 985 (+100)

■ LUCK: 353 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT (HUMAN FORM)

ADAMANTITE HOE (RANK A)

BATTLE WORK CLOTHES III (RANK B)

WORK BOOTS (RANK E)

DRAGON'S TOWEL (RANK B)

■ EQUIPMENT (DRAGON FORM)

DRAGON SADDLE (RANK B)

GODDESS'S COLLAR (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

GEMMATION (UNIQUE SKILL)

BLACK SOIL SCALES (UNIQUE SKILL)

GREEN MAGIC (RANK A)

BLACK MAGIC (RANK F)

BREATH (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK A)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK C)

AGRICULTURE (RANK S)

HORTICULTURE (RANK S)

CONSTRUCTION (RANK A)

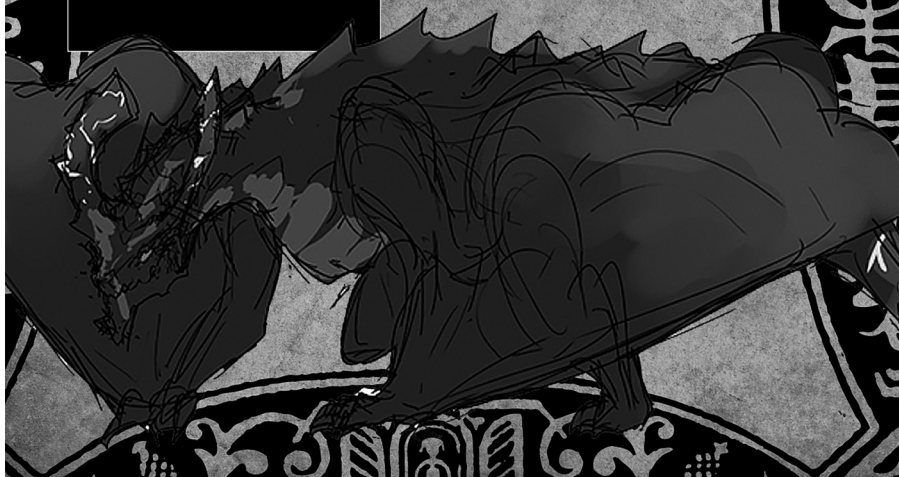
CONVERSATION (RANK D)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE DARKNESS DRAGON KING

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ BOGA

■ 103 Y/O / MALE / ROCK DRAGON (ANCIENT)

■ LEVEL: 119

■ TITLE: SWORD GURU'S FAVORITE DRAGON

■ HP: 4,367 / 4,367 (+1,422) (+100)

■ MP: 238 / 238 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,546 (+160) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,571 (+160) (+100)

■ AGILITY: 818 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 221 (+100)

■ LUCK: 422 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT (DRAGON FORM)

DRAGON SADDLE (RANK B)

■ SKILLS

BREATH (RANK D)

ARMORED SKIN (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK D)

BURROWING (RANK A)

THUNDEROUS VOICE (RANK C)

FORTITUDE (RANK B)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK B)

IRON WALL (RANK B)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING / MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ MDOFARAK

■ 63 Y/O / FEMALE / THREE-HEADED DRAGON (ANCIENT)

■ LEVEL: 117

■ TITLE: SWEET-TOOTHED SNIPER

■ HP: 2,038/2,038 (+100)

■ MP: 1,641/1,641 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 752 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 716 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 629 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 886 (+100)

■ LUCK: 871 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT (DRAGON FORM)

DRAGON SADDLE (RANK B)

■ SKILLS

MULTI-ELEMENTAL CONSTITUTION
(UNIQUE SKILL)

BREATH (RANK S)

FARSIGHT (RANK B)

FLIGHT (RANK A)

CONCENTRATION (RANK A)

MAGIC ATTACHMENT (RANK A)

MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK A)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ ANGE

■ 18 Y/O / FEMALE / TITAN / ASSASSIN

■ LEVEL: 137

■ TITLE: ASSASSIN

■ HP: 2,889/2,889

■ MP: 1,682/1,682

■ STRENGTH: 1,495

■ ENDURANCE: 1,180

■ AGILITY: 5,448 (+640)

■ MAGIC: 905

■ LUCK: 212

■ EQUIPMENT

VICIOUS SWORD CARNAGE (RANK S)

EXPLOSIVE TALISMAN THROWING KNIFE (RANK A) X 2

FLASH GRENADE (RANK C) X 2

POISON KUNAI (RANK B) X 2

SHADOW SHADE (RANK S)

GLOOM (RANK S)

SLAVE COLLAR IV (RANK A)

BLADED BLACK LEATHER BOOTS (RANK B)

■ SKILLS

UNCONTAINABLE (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK A)

THROWING (RANK S)

ANALYZE EYE (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT DETECTION
(RANK A)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

SKY WALK (RANK S)

CONVERSATION (RANK B)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

DISGUISE (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

ASSASSIN'S STRIKE (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK B)

BLACK MAGIC (RANK C)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK S)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK A)

COVERT ACTION (RANK S)

DISGUISE (RANK S)

COMPANIONSHIP (RANK A)

HIDDEN WEAPON CREATION

(RANK A)

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS



■ SHUTOLA TRYCEN

- 18 Y/O / FEMALE / HUMAN / PRINCESS
- LEVEL: 90
- TITLE: AMNESIAC SAGE
- HP: 360/360
- MP: 565/565

- STRENGTH: 185
- ENDURANCE: 192
- AGILITY: 465
- MAGIC: 650
- LUCK: 558

■ EQUIPMENT

TEDDY BEAR (RANK B)
FAIRY DRESS (RANK A)
CLIP OF CAMOUFLAGE II (RANK S)
HIGH-CLASS SHOES (RANK C)

■ SKILLS

PERFECT MEMORY (UNIQUE SKILL)
NERVES OF STEEL (RANK D)
MILITARY TACTIC (RANK D)
DOUBLE GROWTH RATE
DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



Bonus Short Stories

Clotho's Stroll in Gaun

Naturally, it wasn't only Kelvin and those closest to him who were making the most of their company trip to Gaun. For example, the ancient dragon Dahak was chasing after his favorite woman, and Alex would go for long walks with Rion. The most senior member of Kelvin's party, the slime Clotho, was no exception. Even it was having fun in its own way.

The starting point of its stroll was the inn where its master, Kelvin, was staying. With a jiggle to indicate "Mission start!" it went bouncing off on its merry way.

"Oh, Clo-chan! Are you off for a stroll?" Efil asked. "In that case...here you go, a lunch box. I borrowed the inn's kitchen to make it. I've included the latest dish I came up with, so let me know what you think afterwards. Okay, off you go. Take care!"

"Clothoooo! Before you go, try some of my food!" Ruka requested. "What do you think? Is it good? What?! It's just as good as what Efil-sama makes?! Aww, you're praising me too much."

"It said nothing of the sort," Ellie sighed. "Clotho-sama, I'm truly sorry. We won't keep you any longer. Please have a pleasant walk."

After receiving a lunch box and filling its stomach with a snack, Clotho was already quite satisfied. However, its mission had only just begun. So it continued heading out of the inn.

"Clotho, you heading out? I just bought these skewers!" Rion exclaimed. "It's a bit much for me and Alex to finish alone, so here, take one."

"Arf!" Alex barked. (Highly recommended!)

It turned out to be the very same skewer that Melfina had eaten so many of on their first day in Gaun. Seeing how large the hunks of meat were and how many she was holding, Rion had most likely bought enough to share with everyone else. Clotho received the offering gratefully and munched on it while continuing on its way. The slime would swallow monsters whole in the blink of an eye, but when it came to food that was actually delicious, it liked to take its time nibbling.

"Ah, if it isn't Clotho!" Sera called out. "I bought some snacks just now, but it's a bit too much for Kelvin and me to finish by ourselves. It's called Blood Cake and it simply tastes heavenly! Try it!"

“Whoa?!” Dahak started. “B-Brother Clotho, why’re you here?! N-No, I’m not stalking— Oh, right! I found this flower filled with honey just now. Would you like— No, I didn’t mean that in a dirty way! Not in the slightest! Uh, if you’ll excuse me, I have somewhere to be!”

“Oh, hi there, Clotho.” Melfina nodded in greeting. “Ah, I see you are indeed worthy as one who shares the same food-related skills as me. You have a good eye to notice this store here. However, I’m afraid I don’t really have any more spending money to— What? You’re lending me some?! Are you sure?!”

Clotho continued bumping into more companions and acquaintances around every corner, receiving and giving them things in a busy whirlwind of activity. When its stroll finally ended, it returned to the inn it had started from. By a sheer coincidence, right in front of the inn’s entrance...

“Welcome back, Clotho,” Kelvin said warmly. “Did you have fun?”

A Goddess Who Eats Well Is a Good Goddess

During the company trip, the Goddess of Reincarnation Melfina made it her quest to eat at every restaurant and food stall in the city. This task, in what she thought was a minimal effort at maintaining her girly image, hardly seemed a challenge for her, yet she insisted on calling this “mental fortitude training”—training that supposedly pushed her to her limits.

Kelvin and the others purposely chose not to burst her bubble since this was a trip and everyone was free to enjoy it however they wished. That said, there was a danger of the city starving if she was left entirely to her own devices, so Kelvin had tasked the mini-Clotho Melfina carried with her to keep an eye on her.

“Phew. That’s another day of pushing my body and stomach to its limits and withstanding a truly rigorous training menu. It was really satisf— I mean, really rough. Good job, me.”

As a result of her efforts—if they could be called that—her name had become so well-known in the city over the past few days that it could be safely said the only people in relevant industries who did not know of her were new arrivals. After all, she was almost done going through every last eatery in the capital.

“H-Hey man, isn’t that the Goddess of Eating?!” a beastkin exclaimed when he recognized Mel walking down a major avenue.

Another beastkin next to him stopped. “Huh? What’s with that nickname? She is quite easy on the eyes, though...”

“What are you, an outsider?! How many years have you been living in this city?!”

“Huh?! What?!”

In defense of this bystander, let it be said that the events surrounding Mel's skills had only taken place over the past few days, not years.

"Oh, all right. I'll tell you, then. That woman is said to have traveled the world and eaten all cuisines—in short, she is a professional eater. There are rumors that she's the editor-in-chief of a famous food magazine and that she's looking for the next restaurant to feature in her publication!"

Unfortunately, she was but an avid reader of the magazine in question.

"Uh, that last bit is just speculation, right?"

"That's just how mysterious she is! Some even call her 'The Smile' like it's an alias, so I'm sure she's really famous! I'm not pulling your leg!"

"I-I see..."

The vagueness of the excited spectator's info hinted at the possibility that he himself was an outsider too, but he soon fell quiet when Mel stopped and stared at a sign.

This restaurant...is one that I visited on our first day here. I remember it being quite delicious. All right, let's go in for another round of training.

Everyone nearby stared as Mel walked through the doors, humming to herself.

"Dude, let's hurry to that restaurant!" the excited spectator called out, charging forward. "I bet it's a hidden gem! Don't let this opportunity slip away!"

"You seriously saying th— Oh, he's gone." The other guy watched, half-doubtful and half-trusting, as his companion disappeared into the store. *Aren't you being a bit too much of a groupie, man?* flashed through his mind.

Another man nearby shouted to his partner, "That really was the Goddess of Eating! It's said that you get blessed with good luck if you eat with her! Let's go, man!"

"Thank the heavens, oh, thank the gods above..." an old man said worshipfully. "Dear, let's have lunch at this place."

"Ha ha, of course, dear," his wife replied. "It looks like today is going to be a good day."

A cry of "Is this where The Smile's gone?!" rang out as even more people rushed over.

Folks of all ages flooded into the restaurant in pursuit of the one who had first entered. The goddess's features were beautiful and her hearty way of eating was enjoyable to watch. Attention begot attention, and everything resulted in the restaurant being swamped with orders. Mel was happy, the other customers were happy, and though the cooks felt like they were going to die, they were making a

massive amount of money and were therefore ultimately also happy.

“I...guess I’ll also give this place a try, then,” murmured the last beastkin who had been left behind.

Efil and Ange’s Pajama Party

After the Beast King Festival and everything else that had happened in the interim were over, Efil and Ange became even closer friends than before. Tonight, in order to reaffirm their relationship and develop it further, the two of them decided to share a room and have a pajama party. Sera and Rion caught wind and wanted to join in, but they read the room and held themselves back. Efil and Ange sensed this in turn and inwardly thanked their companions for their consideration while resolving to enjoy their time together to their fullest.

“Oh gosh, I really do love talking with you, Efil-chan. We’re on the same page about so many things, we’re practically the same person!”

“I do feel the same way, but I believe you might have had just a bit too much to drink, Ange-san.”

“Ahhhhhhh! You’re too cute, Efil-chan! I really, *really* understand why Kelvin’s head over heels for you!”

“Ah! A-Ange-san, you really have had too much!”

Ange impulsively pushed Efil back onto the bed, burying her face in her friend’s chest and rubbing her cheeks against the shapely mounds. This was indeed a method of physical bonding only available to girls, but Ange was taking it a bit too far. Efil turned her eyes to the table with all their drinks and snacks, thinking of calling an end to their time together.

I suppose I can wake up a little earlier tomorrow to clean up.

Even as someone who dedicated herself so fully to the Way of the Maid, Efil would not cast aside her friend just to go clean. She found a compromise within herself, then suggested to Ange that, since it was getting late, they should go sleep. Ange was already feeling sleepy thanks to all the alcohol in her system, so she agreed.

“Wah...I’m in such a good mood...”

“That is truly wonderful, but our time in Gaun is running out. Let’s get some proper sleep tonight so we’ll have plenty of energy for tomorrow.”

Of course, the two were sleeping in the same bed. It could be said that they were bosom friends.

“Say, Efil-chan...are you still awake?”

“What is the matter?”

“The thought just occurred to me that there’s a topic we just *have*

to talk about when staying up like this. Um, how do you feel about Kelvin?”

“I love him more than anyone in the world.”

“Wow, what a direct answer! Aha ha, I guess that was a silly thing to ask you. Specifically, what part of him do you love? For me, it’s his head, eheh heh...”

“When asked what I love about Master, I simply have to say that every part of him is unbearably precious to me. But I suppose that would not do as an answer, so let me start listing them instead. First, the sense of joy and fulfillment that fills my chest when I wake up and see Master’s sleeping face and bedhead in the morning is simply indescribable. Every day, there is a slight difference in how his hair is messed up; there are days when it’s all springy, days when it’s wildly ruffled, and the contrast with his sleeping face just makes my chest go all tight, with there being a countless number of variations—”

“H-Hold on a moment. Um, Efil-chan...are you drunk?”

Ange couldn’t help interrupting as Efil started going on and on without end. Just as she suspected, Efil actually was quite drunk.

“Zzz...”

“And you’re already asleep! Who’d have thought I’d get to see such an unexpected side of a close friend!”

That was just how happy Efil was about making a close friend of Ange. That night, Efil had a very pleasant sleep indeed.

The Legend of Gaun’s Beast God

There was a legend in Gaunian culture surrounding the Beast God, a beast that looked like a strange dog wearing a mask. The stories described him arriving in this land and repelling a certain catastrophe so long ago that it wasn’t clear whether Gaun had been founded yet. There was no record of what that catastrophe was, leaving scholars to debate fiercely whether it was a natural disaster or an unnatural monster outbreak.

There were currently two forms zipping through the deep forest surrounding the capital at mind-boggling speeds. Very few people would have been able to spot them going by, even if they’d happened to be out hunting in those woods and looked up at just the right moment. It would have been different if the Beast King had happened to be with them, but expecting so much from mere hunters was a tall order.

“Phew, what great walking weather it is today, huh, Alex?”

“Awoo!” (Walks are fun in the rain too, though!)

The pair was taking a small break on top of a sturdy tree bough. They had come out all this way as part of their walk, though not

entirely on purpose. The new terrain, wide-open land, and taller trees than they were used to had gotten them a bit overexcited.

Consequently, they had traveled farther than originally planned.

“Hey, I have an idea. Unlike the city, it’s all open here. Wanna play you-know-what?”

“Arf!” (I do, I do!)

Alex’s immediate reply prompted Rion to reach into mini-Clotho and take out a superalloy boomerang that had been made tough enough not to break in Alex’s mouth.

“You ready? Off you go!”

“Awooooo!” (Wait for meee!)

The boomerang slipped through the trees and flew off into the distance. Alex chased after it, completing a scene often seen in dog parks. Ignoring all the size differences, that is.

“I-Is that...the Beast God from the legends?!”

There was one person who had caught sight of Alex playing from afar. That person quivered as he did a double then a triple take, struggling to believe what he was seeing.

“So the Beast God really does exist!”

Barely able to register the sight, yet managing to figure out where he should look by sensing the little sister energy emanating from that direction, was Kilto Gaun. The fact that he could only sort of see things led him to a misunderstanding. When he reported back, the topic swept through the country and was all the rage for quite a while. Supposedly, a giant beast with something gleaming and metallic on its face—in short, the Beast God—had been sighted.

Rion and Shutola’s Plan to Become Fashionable

“Rion-chan! Let’s become fashionable!”

“Uh...what?”

Shutola’s abrupt suggestion made Rion’s hand stop brushing Alex’s fur mid-stroke. In turn, this led Alex to perk up too.

“Where did that come from, Shutola-chan?”

“You know how I’ve been living in a castle all my life? I just realized I’ve never gotten to choose or buy my own clothes before.”

“Ahh, I see. But didn’t you get to wear really nice dresses in the castle? I’m sure they were fashionable.”

“They were, but they were all prepared for me by someone else. And, uh, I don’t want to bother dearest sister Efil, so I want to go to a clothing store and buy something with my own allowance!”

“Mm...I feel like Efil-nee would actually be happier if you asked her.”

“Y-You think so?”

It was at this moment that Rion came to a realization. Shutola actually wanted to go shopping and was just making up reasons for it.

“Okay, how about this? Let’s go to a clothing store, and if you see something you like, I’ll sketch a design based on it afterwards and you can ask Efil-nee to make it for you. It’ll be a unique outfit that’s yours and yours alone!”

“Aww, I’d love that! Oh, but...doesn’t that mean we’d just be browsing the stores? Wouldn’t that be a bother to the staff?”

“It’s called ‘window-shopping,’ and I think it’s fine.”

“You know so much, Rion-chan!”

Rion had seen Sera do the same thing many times before and had wanted to try it herself one day—although in Sera’s case, she did not know how to sketch and resorted to verbally describing the elements she wanted. Consequently, her outfits ended up with a lot of ideas from Efil herself. Even so, Sera was more than happy with the end result every time, so clearly it was working out for both of them.

Upon entering a clothing store in the capital, both Rion and Shutola stared at the outfits on display with intense looks on their faces.

“How do I put this?” Rion murmured. “They’re all really...impactful.”

“Even the clothes for girls are so revealing...” Shutola agreed. “I feel like this would suit dearest sister Sera really well. It’s very, like, sexy? But I don’t really have, uh, her curves...”

Both looked troubled as they stood before the racks of clothes that were unexpectedly unsuitable for children. They wanted to grow up soon.

“Wait, but this hood with holes for beast ears is cute. And this one has a tail attached too!”

“Wah, it’s so cute! Like a doggy or kitty!”

However, they still found various parts of different outfits that they liked, somehow managing to gather enough ideas to put together a complete outfit. And for their part, the staff on duty had a blast helping the children dress up rather than making a sale.

“Thank you for visiting! We hope to see you again!”

Even though they didn’t buy anything, all of the staff members came out to see Rion and Shutola off. No matter the world, cuteness was indeed justice.

“Yay, we got a lot of ideas!”

“Now we can have the perfect pajamas! In a way, this is fashionable too!”

From then on, Rion and Shutola might or might not have started wearing pajamas with animal-ear hoods and tails.

The Battle Junkie's Grand Trip

The Celsius family was visiting Gaun on a company relaxation trip. This was a wonderful idea—funded mainly by Kelvin's pocket money—to both thank those who had been working for the family all this time and to provide an opportunity for everyone to deepen their relationships. Depending on whose perspective, however, it could also be considered a terrifying plan for giving a group of people who normally already did whatever they wanted justification to go completely wild.

When a group of such remarkable people went on a trip together, they were guaranteed to whip up a hurricane or two. And sure enough, they left an incredible mark on the Beast King Festival in all its variations. There was at least one person in Kelvin's group who was especially proficient in one of every type of competition, be it martial prowess, wine drinking, or wits, and they all somehow managed to stumble upon their respective tournaments and join in at the last minute due to some twists of fate.

Of course, everyone holding a copy of the latest edition of the Adventurer Directory would imagine Kelvin, as the leader of such a talented and varied cast, to be incredibly wise, upstanding, and greatly respected by those under his command... Okay, no, not many people actually thought that. No one had the heart to let him know, but the general public's opinion of him was more along the lines of, "Yeah, he's incredible, but...y'know?" due to the reputation he had garnered as being someone who'd gone off the rail in various ways.

Now, just how did this battle junkie with a less than flattering entry in the Directory spend his day? Let's follow him and see how he spends one of his days on this trip.



Kelvin's eyes slowly fluttered open. "Mm... It's morning, huh," he said as he yawned.

"Good morning, Master," Efil replied.

A battle junkie's mornings started early. It did not matter where he was, be it his house, on a trip, inside a dungeon, or camping out, he always woke up at a specific time each day. Finding Efil right in front of his face when waking up was also a common way for his day to begin. This time, he got to wake up naturally, but when unlucky, he would at times be awoken by a punch from Mel or a drop kick from Ruka. Life was not all smooth sailing for this Rank S adventurer.

After waking up and having breakfast, it was time for his tempestuous and dramatic day to begin. The first item on his schedule was to play with Rion, Shutola, and Ruka. Giving in to their pleading,

he brought them to the closest venue where participants could try hunting for the first time.

“Uh, girls, isn’t this what we normally do?”

“It’s completely different, dearest brother!”

“It’s different in that this is purely for amusement, Kel-nii.”

“Gosh, you just don’t get it, Master!”

“Uhh...if you say so.”

Kelvin spent the rest of his time with the girls not quite understanding what they were saying. However, because this group always made sure to stay safe and took all available precautions, Kelvin knew he could relax while watching over them. It was from this point onward that he had to brace himself somewhat.

“Kelvin, let’s go fishing for the boss of Lake Gaun! Hurry up and get ready!”

“Honey, I want to try eating what a member of a royal family eats. Just once is enough, so can you ask the Beast King for me? Don’t worry, I’ll go with you!”

“Kelvin, your neck is wide open— Aww, you dodged!”

In this way, the women in his party all sprung pretty unreasonable requests on him in quick succession, though we won’t expose who said what. Clearing these demands was a requirement to earn the right to hang out with them.

“Kelvin-chaaaan! Ah hah, guess who decided to pop by?”

The sudden encounters were not simply limited to his family members, of course. At times, a certain peach-colored ogre might show up out of the blue, whittling down Kelvin’s mental strength each time.

“If you’re looking for Gerard, he just went that way. If you run, you might catch up.”

“Thank you! Gerard-saaaa!”

The ability to make quick judgment calls was important. When it was necessary to sell out a friend, one had to do so swiftly and decisively. Kelvin had shown no hesitation at all today.

::Rawr, rawr!::

::Rooaar!::

I know, I know. I’ll let you guys stretch your wings outside the city a bit later.

Naturally, Kelvin could not forget about Mdofarak and Boga within his magic pool. With their large bodies and inability to take human form, they could only enjoy this trip outside the city limits. As their master, it was Kelvin’s responsibility to make sure they were not left out. Thankfully, they weren’t much trouble otherwise.

After hanging out with everyone throughout the day, night fell. Kelvin finally got to retreat to his own room in the inn.

“Phew, I’m so tired...”

“Long day today, Master?”

“Mm. So much happened today, which I guess is par for the course. But, well, it’s all worth it and I appreciate every moment.”

However, his exhaustion was real, and he promptly dove right into bed after Efil helped him into his sleepwear. Since everyone around him had been highly excited all day, he’d had to match their level of enthusiasm. Naturally, doing so was extremely tiring.

“Um, Master...”

“Hm? What is it?”

Efil’s shy voice compelled Kelvin to turn his face, which had been planted into his pillow, towards his companion.

“Are you up to, um, enjoy tonight? Of course, if you need to sleep —”

“Oh...”

Of course, this was hardly a problem of can or cannot—“no” was simply not an answer. Without a second thought, he pulled Efil into bed with him. It would be a while yet before he actually got any rest.

Black and Black Iron Crossing Paths

It was early afternoon. The sun’s rays shone with a pleasant warmth, and the world seemed idyllic and at peace. It was impossible to tell where exactly the setting was, but there was definitely a restaurant right next to a mountain. Given its out-of-the-way location, there wasn’t a single customer inside despite it being lunch hour. The only sound was that of the owner polishing a glass.

“Honey, this must be it! Right here! The restaurant that’s so hard to find it’s said to be a myth!”

“You idiot, Mel, don’t shout that in such a loud voice! Aha ha... Sorry, sir. Do you have a table for two?”

“You do, right?! I’m sure you do!”

The owner silently jerked his head towards an empty table. His first customers of the day were a guy with black hair wearing a black robe and a girl with blue hair clad in a holy air. As soon as they settled in, the girl started excitedly poring over the menu.

Just then, two other people entered.

“Huh? Has there always been a restaurant here?”

“We did basically just follow a whole bunch of animal tracks. Master, your disciple is now hungry!”

“Well, I suppose it would be cruel to make you wait till we get back and then cook for the both of us. Mister, do you have room for two?”

Again, the owner jerked his head towards an empty table without

saying anything. This second pair of customers consisted of a guy with black hair wearing a black robe and a lively-looking girl with a ponytail in an orange robe. The moment she plopped into a seat, she began analyzing the menu.

“For starters...I think I’ll have everything from here to here.”

“In other words, the whole menu. You...sure that’s enough?”

“Master, what should we do?! I’ve never seen any of these dishes before!”

“You’re basically saying that you want to try all of them, right? To steal the recipes?”

Both groups seemed ready to place their orders. The two guys raised their menus high up and turned to the owner.

“Uh, ahem. Excuse me, can we have everything from here to here, please?”

“Sorry, sir. Please bring us one of everything on the menu.”

The girls’ eyes met. They turned to each other as naturally as if fate were drawing them together. They gulped.

Is this girl a new food fighter in these parts? I can see it clear as day—that overwhelming fighting spirit dwelling within a small body! She’s quite capable. Maybe as good as—no, she might even be better than Sylvia!

Wow, what a pretty lady. And I really feel her passion for food. She’s mom’s equa—no, I think she’s even beyond mom. Eating is fun, but I bet it’d also be fun to cook for her.

The thoughts of the two girls were completely different, but they were both on the mark, after a fashion. The owner, to his credit, did not flinch at the orders. He simply gave them a nod that conveyed a single word: “Wait.”

From there, a storm ensued. Mountains of plates were rushed to the two tables like tsunami waves that receded into the stomachs of the girls. It was just the owner making and carrying the food, and mainly the two girls eating, coming to a very small tally of people involved, and yet it took no time at all for a great maelstrom to be generated and reach speeds that no normal person could comprehend.

Are you kidding me?! That girl’s able to match Melfina’s speed! Who on earth is she? A champion food fighter from the Western Continent? Where is she packing all that food inside her small form?

Are you serious?! What’s with that woman?! She’s matching or even faster than Haru! I feel so bad for her boyfriend’s wallet—what a relief Haru is helping to make ends meet on our side.

Both guys shivered upon realizing the lamentable fact that this world was home to yet another powerhouse on par with their companion.

Two cries of “Phew, thank you for the food” rang out at the same time.

Both guys shivered again, this time at the unfathomable skill of the owner who had managed to continue feeding both girls all by himself.

“Mm. Glad to see you both enjoyed everything. I don’t need your money; donate it to an orphanage instead.”

Both guys shivered one last time upon hearing the owner’s suave, manly voice and the words that displayed his magnanimity.

There are still so many surprises in this world. That girl looked like she was having every bit as much fun as Mel was while she was eating.

What a lucky day this is. I got to see something unusual and we saved on food fees.

The two pairs left the restaurant and went their separate ways. No one looked back, and in fact, the restaurant was no longer even there.

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by Doufu Mayoi

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